



# Slavery and the Civil War in Cultural Memory

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Slavery and the Civil War in Cultural Memory

A dissertation presented

by

Christina Katherine Adkins

to

the Committee on Higher Degrees in American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

American Studies

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## Slavery and the Civil War in Cultural Memory

### Abstract

That slavery was largely excised from the cultural memory of the Civil War in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly by white Americans, is well documented; *Slavery and the Civil War in Cultural Memory* moves beyond that story of omission to ask how slavery has been represented in U.S. culture and, necessarily, how it figures into some of the twentieth century's most popular Civil War narratives. The study begins in the 1930s with the publication of *Gone with the Wind*—arguably the most popular Civil War novel of all time—and reads Margaret Mitchell's pervasive tale of ex-slaveholder adversity against contemporaneous narratives like *Black Reconstruction in America*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Black Boy/American Hunger*, which contradict Mitchell's account of slavery, the war, and Reconstruction. Spanning nearly seven decades, this study tells the story of how cultural productions have continued to reinterpret slavery. Focusing primarily on novels and films but also drawing on interviews with ex-slaves, private journals, and court records, each chapter explores how slavery is represented in a particular historical epoch and highlights each narrative's contribution to the creation of cultural memory, particularly its conformity to earlier works or its revision of antecedents. In addition, *Slavery and the Civil War in Cultural Memory* traces representations of slavery through recurring themes such as hunger, disease, marriage, and madness and seeks to understand how the narratives in question comment directly on the concept of memory. Among the topics discussed are the Civil War centennial; how Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* relates

slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction to the civil rights movement of the 1960s; the controversy over *The Confessions of Nat Turner*; the *Roots* phenomenon, and the copyright lawsuit filed against the publisher of Alice Randall's unauthorized parody, *The Wind Done Gone*. The study concludes in 2005, with *March*, Geraldine Brooks's reimagining of *Little Women*, and E.L. Doctorow's *The March*, about Sherman's campaign through Georgia and the Carolinas. A pattern emerges in the final chapters that shows recent authors conjuring, in order to revise, elements of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Gone With the Wind*.

## Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
1 The 1930s: Margaret Mitchell, W.E.B. DuBois, and the Works of William Faulkner	23
2 Memories of Ex-Slaves and their Descendants, from the 1930s to World War II: The Federal Writer's Project, <i>12 Million Black Voices</i> , and the "Hunger" of Richard Wright	88
3 A Cold War Era Centennial: MacKinlay Kantor, Robert Penn Warren, and Two Sides of the "Great Alibi"	134
4 Slavery, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s: <i>Jubilee</i> and the Journals of Margaret Walker	207
5 William Styron, <i>Ten Black Writers</i> , and the Battle Over <i>Nat Turner</i>	267
6 Slavery and Apostasy at Gettysburg: Michael Shaara's <i>The Killer Angels</i> and "The Soldier's Faith" in the Vietnam Era	321
7 Seven Generations of "An American Family" in Slavery and Freedom: The Cultural Phenomenon of <i>Roots</i>	368
8 "A Wound that has Not Healed": Sherley Anne Williams, <i>Dessa Rose</i> , and the Literature of Slavery	450
9 "Remembering Seemed Unwise": Motherhood, Infanticide, and Memory as Human Parasitism in Toni Morrison's <i>Beloved</i>	494
10 Slavery and the Civil War in the 1990s: From Ken Burns to <i>Cold Mountain</i> , a Decade of Narrative Response to <i>The Killer Angels</i>	518
11 "Who Controls How History is Imagined?": Alice Randall, <i>The Wind Done Gone</i> , and the Copyright War Over an "Unauthorized Parody"	594
12 <i>The Known World</i> : Race, Class, and Family Relations in Edward P. Jones's America	664
13 "I Never Promised I Would Write the Truth": Geraldine Brooks's	

- March* and the Formation of Cultural Memory in Two Family Stories 694
- 14 Freedom and the Crisis of National Identity in E.L. Doctorow's *The March* 731

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## Introduction

At the end of the novel *Beloved*, after the title character has disappeared from 1870s Cincinnati, the town's African American residents, writes Toni Morrison, "forgot her like a bad dream." *Beloved*, who embodies ex-slaves' traumatic experience of bondage, traps Sethe in a destructive cycle of remembering. When *Beloved* is finally driven off by the praying women who determine that Sethe should not be possessed by her past, the townspeople cease to speak of *Beloved* or recall her existence. In their estimation, "It was not a story to pass on." To them, "Remembering seemed unwise."<sup>1</sup> *Beloved* dramatizes both individual memory, in Sethe's psychologically painful recollections, and cultural memory, in the town's collective effort not to recall *Beloved* in its oral traditions or recount the events that occurred during her time there. In the decades after U.S. emancipation, slavery often—to quote Morrison—"was not a story to pass on." For different reasons, some of which are suggested by *Beloved*, Americans black and white were reluctant to recall the slave past. The fact of slavery's omission in literature and public forums and the process by which that exclusion occurred has been well documented, though usually in works that make representation of the Civil War their primary subject of inquiry. While it is virtually impossible to treat slavery and the Civil War as separate, unrelated topics, what follows is a comprehensive study of how slavery has been remembered in U.S. culture. The Civil War is an important part of that inquiry to the extent that it illuminates the memory of slavery, for instance, as part of an emancipation narrative or a competing version of the past that minimizes the role of slaves and slavery in the war.

In the 1980s and '90s, conversations about cultural memory replaced what scholars had previously referred to as myth, a set of metaphors and cultural narratives that articulated and

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 259-260.

transmitted a people's experience and world view.<sup>2</sup> Cultural memory entails groups of people with a common sense of identity—be it race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, nationhood or some other shared attribute—constructing a collectively held interpretation of the past.<sup>3</sup> Cultural memory never exists in a single uniform account, but in multiple and often conflicting narratives, which contend for primacy. As their own experiences provide the lens through which these groups reconstruct and narrate history, the stories they collectively tell also suggest how they understand themselves.<sup>4</sup> How Americans have remembered slavery and the Civil War is also the story of how they have articulated their relationship to the nation, how their narratives relate to each other, and how their interpretations of the past continue to be reconsidered and revised.

Though it has usually been incidental to other avenues of research, two major arguments about the cultural memory of slavery have emerged in existing scholarship. First, the cultural narratives of slavery diverge along the racial or ethnic identities of the groups who articulate them. Second, as these narratives contend in public consciousness, the memories narrated by slaves and their descendants have often been marginalized by the Civil War interpretations of white Americans, who from various motives seek to omit or ignore slavery. Though not specifically conceived as a work on cultural memory, Daniel Aaron's classic study of Civil War literature, *The Unwritten War* (1973) examines

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985; repr., HarperPerennial, 1994), 16; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973; repr., New York: HarperPerennial, 1996), 3.

<sup>3</sup> David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 1, 4.

<sup>4</sup> On cultural memory see also Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Memory Theory* 41, no. 2 (May 2002): 179-197, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590762>; Susan A. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1372-1385, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2171068>; Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1386-1403, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2171069>; Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928520>; Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," special issue, *Representations*, 69 (Winter 2000): 127-150, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2902903>; Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, eds., *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

writings from the 1850s to the novels of William Faulkner and argues that with few exceptions, writers “draped the war in myth” and failed to “say something revealing about the meaning, if not the causes of the war.”<sup>5</sup> Without chattel slavery, writes Aaron, the Civil War would not have been fought, yet African Americans “figured only peripherally” in the literature of the war and then only “as an object of contempt or dread, or an uncomfortable reminder of abandoned obligations, or a pestiferous shadow, emblematic of guilt and retribution.”<sup>6</sup>

In *The Romance of Reunion* (1993), Nina Silber examines the culture of reunion that emerged in the late nineteenth century and explains how narratives of the war became cast in sentimental terms. Silber focuses on narratives constructed primarily by middle and upper class northerners from 1865 to 1900 and shows how northerners’ understanding of Union victory, the South, and reconciliation was shaped by nostalgia for Victorian morality, especially traditional Victorian gender roles.<sup>7</sup> Silber observes that “forgetfulness, not memory, appears to be the dominant theme of reunion culture.” Amid what she describes as an “atmosphere of historical amnesia,” northerners increasingly ignored the history of slavery.<sup>8</sup> Among those who bothered to address slavery, the prevailing message, writes Silber, was that “slavery may have been part of American history, but it was not significant enough to demand too much attention in the present.” White Northerners adopted this attitude about slavery as an expedient to restoring “a true sense of nationalism,” which many defined in terms of “Anglo-Saxon unity.” The few exceptions, according to Silber, could be found among abolitionists and their children, who “stressed remembrance, especially the need to remember the scourge of slavery and the reasons

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (1973; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), xviii. Citations refer to Oxford University Press paperback edition. In describing the Civil War as “draped in myth” Aaron is paraphrasing Oscar Handlin.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 2-3, 9, 117, 166.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4, 156, 124.

why the Civil War was fought.”<sup>9</sup>

Also in the 1990s, after living abroad for nine years, journalist Tony Horwitz returned to the United States to discover that millions of Americans had come to share his childhood fascination with the Civil War. *Confederates in the Attic* (1998) is Horwitz’s first person account of more than a year spent exploring Civil War sites and “searching out the places and people who kept memory of the conflict alive in the present day.”<sup>10</sup> His journey through modern Civil War memory lead Horwitz to recognize the divided nature of remembrance, especially concerning issues of race and the role of slavery in Americans’ understanding of the war. In the same week, Horwitz attended a birthday party for Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson—held by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans—and a church service to commemorate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. The contrast between the two events and the views of their participants encapsulates the conflicting Civil War narratives Horwitz repeatedly encountered in his research. At the joint UDC and SCV event, participants venerated Southern generals and spoke of their Confederate ancestors “as though [their] kinsmen died yesterday, not 130 years ago.”<sup>11</sup> At the King service, when Horwitz asked an African American man in his pew how he felt about such Confederate celebrations, the churchgoer replied that he was “happy they have the freedom to celebrate those men, the same way we celebrate King here” but suggested that the secret and exclusive nature of the Lee-Jackson event indicated something inherently shameful in the celebration.<sup>12</sup> Also at the MLK observance, Horwitz met a young black preacher named Michael King, who once received hate mail after publicly questioning the placement of a Confederate monument at a busy intersection. Letters to the local newspaper insisted the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 156-157.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 43

monument, which was owned by the UDC, was not intended to have racial implications but to honor ancestors who had fought and died for their convictions. King's view on the matter was that "your great-grandfather fought and died because he believed my great-grandfather should stay a slave. I'm supposed to feel all warm inside about that?" Asked whether "there was any way for white Southerners to honor their forbears without insulting his," King prescribed, "Remember your ancestors...but remember what they fought for too, and recognize it was wrong. Then maybe you can invite me to your Lee and Jackson birthday party."<sup>13</sup>

Horwitz returns to a similar line of inquiry nearly two hundred pages later when he poses the question, "Was there such a thing as politically correct remembrance of the Confederacy? Or was any attempt to honor the Cause inevitably tainted by what Southerners once delicately referred to as their 'peculiar institution'?"<sup>14</sup> While Horwitz offers no definitive answer, his insights into the divided nature of Civil War memory leads him to conclude, "Everywhere, it seemed, I had to explore two pasts and two presents; one white, one black, separate and unreconcilable." According to Horwitz, "The past had poisoned the present and the present, in turn, now poisoned remembrance of things past. So there needed to be a black Memorial Day and a white Veterans Day. A black city museum and a white one. A black history month and a white calendar of remembrance. The best that could be hoped for was a grudging toleration of each other's historical memory."<sup>15</sup>

In *Race and Reunion* (2001), David Blight's study of the first fifty years of Civil War memory, Blight identifies three distinct narratives that "clashed and contended" in the realm of public memory: a reconciliationist view propelled by the need to reunite a divided nation; a white supremacist vision; and an emancipationist narrative that cast the war as both a "reinvention of the republic" and the means of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 208.

African Americans' "liberation...to citizenship and Constitutional equality."<sup>16</sup> Blight traces the process by which memory of the war became increasingly segregated as the reconciliationist impulse left many white Americans loath to discuss the still-contentious issues of race, slavery, emancipation, and black equality. Blight highlights the politics of failed Reconstruction, literature that championed national reunification, a veterans' culture that emphasized Blue-Gray fraternalism and shared sacrifice, as well as a Lost Cause narrative that transformed military defeat into a moral victory for the Confederacy. Ultimately, Blight illustrates how in the public consciousness of white Americans, the Civil War became a popular, romanticized myth, devoid of cause or consequences. As Blight puts it, the first fifty years of Civil War memory is "a story of how the forces of reconciliation overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national culture, [and] how the inexorable drive for reunion both used and trumped race."<sup>17</sup>

What Blight refers to as the emancipationist vision encompasses the various meanings African Americans ascribed to their freedom, along with multiple interpretations of how to understand that freedom in relation to slavery. According to Blight, some African Americans in the late nineteenth century characterized slavery as a "dark knight, a lost epoch" or a "paralytic burden."<sup>18</sup> For slavery's survivors, recalling their experience was a painful process, and in the accounts of ex-slaves Blight finds "expressions of shame sometimes mixed with conservative nostalgia and interracial contempt."<sup>19</sup> He also suggests that many freedpeople may have resembled the ex-slave characters of *Beloved*—"haunted by slavery's physical and psychic tortures, but desperate to live in peace and normalcy."<sup>20</sup> Well into the

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<sup>16</sup> David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 313, 300.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

1880s, Blight finds, newspaper advertisements for relatives who had been sold and separated evidenced freedpeople's efforts to reconstitute their familial connections.<sup>21</sup> Yet the memories of slavery that were published during this period were not the accounts of slavery's survivors but the "romantic fantasies of dialect writers." According to Blight, the "stories of slave sales, of displaced black migrants seeking new lives in new places, of the deprivation and humiliation of slavery, did not sell in a culture eager to purchase tales of reunion and soldiers' glory."<sup>22</sup> Blight also notes the conflicting messages espoused by black intellectuals on the memory of slavery, which was widely regarded as the starting point from which to measure racial progress.<sup>23</sup> In a commencement address delivered on Memorial Day in 1885 at Storer College, Alexander Crummell maintained that too much active recollection of slavery would impede racial progress; instead, he urged graduates to orient themselves toward the future.<sup>24</sup> Contrarily, Frederick Douglass, who also characterized emancipation as a rebirth, urged what Blight calls "aggressive vigilance about memory," as a corrective to Americans' alarming forgetfulness about the causes and consequences of the Civil War, particularly when many whites had begun to characterize emancipation as a failure and a source of black degeneration.<sup>25</sup> Booker T. Washington, however, argued in favor of a reconciliationist vision, which he curiously cast as a path to economic progress for African Americans.<sup>26</sup>

In *The Southern Past* (2005), W. Fitzhugh Brundage examines the historical memory of the South and similarly finds, as his subtitle suggests, *A Clash of Race and Memory* that began with the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 316

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 327.



first Emancipation Day ceremonies in 1864 and continues to the present. Brundage notes that for white “Southerners” who refuse to see the failure of the Confederacy as anything other than a “defeat,” the mantle of “Southern identity” apparently does not extend to African Americans living in the South. From this point of contestation, Brundage traces historical memory in the South through the lens of race and identity. He demonstrates how those memories collided, how white Southerners attempted to suppress institutions of black historical memory in favor of a white master narrative, and how black historical memory challenged the white narrative of the Southern past.<sup>27</sup>

*The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (2004), a volume of essays edited by Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, considers several sites of contested Civil War memory, including the memoir of Ulysses S. Grant, which challenged the reconciliation-trumps-race phenomenon with its frank identification of slavery as the cause of the war. James McPherson highlights the “Southern Textbook Crusade” in which the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the United Confederate Veterans established vigilance committees to ensure that history textbooks at every educational level portrayed the South and the Confederate cause in a favorable light. The final essay, Jon Weiner’s “Civil War, Cold War, Civil Rights” marks the beginning of a scholarly focus on the Civil War centennial, observed amid the Cold War and civil rights movement. In *Troubled Commemoration* (2007), Robert J. Cook details how the official commemoration, conceived as a Cold War display of national unity and patriotism, largely ignored the Civil War’s causes and the legacy of emancipation. Cook shows how celebrations of the Confederacy became part and parcel of white supremacist opposition to integration and black equality. He also shows how African Americans adopted a rhetoric that cast the civil rights movement of the 1960s as part of the unfinished legacy of the Civil War and emancipation. In *American Oracle* (2011), David Blight examines the biographies and work of four centennial-era

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<sup>27</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 2.

writers—Robert Penn Warren, Bruce Catton, Edmund Wilson, and James Baldwin—and finds their commentary on the war united by the common theme of the Civil War as tragedy.

Literary criticism about novels of slavery has also contributed to our understanding of how slavery has been remembered in American culture. Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives* (1999) defines the genre of the book's title as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative."<sup>28</sup> Rushdy argues that authors of neo-slave narratives wanted to reclaim the form of the slave narrative after two white authors, William Styron and Daniel Panger, were widely considered to have committed a cultural appropriation by adopting the form for their novels about slave revolt leader Nat Turner. According to Rushdy, writers of neo-slave narratives returned to the form in which African American first expressed their political subjectivity, in order to reflect on the Black Power movement of the late 1960s.<sup>29</sup>

Tim Ryan takes a longer view in *Calls and Responses* (2008) and begins his study with Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Ryan introduces the concept of "calls and responses" to explain how authors answer their literary predecessors and reimagine earlier narratives of slavery. Though illustrative of the process of changing, dynamic narratives, the concept of "calls and responses" might simply be understood as a variation of the idea, which is central to memory studies, that contradictory narratives compete and contend for primacy in the cultural imagination. Also, without directly engaging theories of cultural memory, Ryan disputes the existence of a dominant "master" narrative. His assertion, however, does not take into account that one narrative—the blockbuster *Gone With the Wind*, for example—might exceed another in popularity that can be quantified by book or ticket sales.

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<sup>28</sup> Ashraf Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

In seeking to understand the cultural memory of slavery, I have looked first to the most popular narratives. The degree to which a film or novel achieves commercial success can also be taken as indicator of its audience appeal and its resonance in mass culture.<sup>30</sup> By examining the narratives that have been most read and most viewed, one can discern which narratives shaped and reflected their audience's views of the slave past. While these narratives often contend with each other to reveal the dissonance in slavery and Civil War memory, at times it is also necessary to look beyond the runaway bestseller or the cinematic blockbuster to find voices of dissent. The following study begins in 1936, with the publication of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*—arguably the most popular Civil War novel of all time—and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, which, despite being critically underestimated when it first appeared in print, became extremely influential both as the Faulkner's acknowledged masterpiece and as a text that informed the work of subsequent authors. The study ends in 2005, with two similarly titled novels, Geraldine Brooks's *March*—a reimagining of *Little Women*—and E.L. Doctorow's *The March*, about Sherman's campaign through Georgia and the Carolinas. Essentially picking up where previous studies have left off, I trace the cultural memory of slavery and the Civil War to relatively recent works and show how cultural narratives of the 1990s and early 2000s revived, revised, and criticized defining works of previous decades. Individually, each chapter explores what a single work or group of works reveals about the cultural memory of slavery at a given time. Cumulatively, these chapters tell a story spanning almost seven decades about how cultural productions have altered or reinterpreted American slavery and the Civil War. What emerges, particularly in the final four chapters, is a pattern of authors conjuring in order to revise earlier influential cultural productions, especially *Gone With the Wind* and *Absalom, Absalom!* While it is not my intention to diminish these later narratives by viewing them strictly in relation to their predecessors or only in terms of their revisionist project, I have, nevertheless, attempted to highlight points of continuity and

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<sup>30</sup> Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 28-29.

divergence in order to understand the broader implications for cultural memory. At times, D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* figures in the narrative analysis. Since Griffith's film has been thoroughly examined by other scholars, particularly Melvyn Stokes in *D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation* and Linda Williams in *Playing the Race Card*, I have not included an extended discussion here.

*Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell's tale of white Southern fortitude, which appealed so strongly to Depression-era readers, portrayed slavery as a world of indulgent masters and loyal slaves. It also maligned freedpeople who dared to exercise their rights of citizenship. Because *Gone with the Wind* espoused much of the same rhetoric as supposedly non-fiction works that romanticized slavery, lamented emancipation, and portrayed black political rights as a form of tyranny over the white South, some readers saw the similarities as a testament to the novel's historical accuracy. At the time of the novel's publication, the work of Ulrich B. Phillips still dominated academic histories of slavery. A product of the post-Reconstruction South, Phillips reinforced the racial stereotypes and representations of master-slave relationships inherent in the Lost Cause mythology. His *American Negro Slavery* (1918) depicted a benevolent paternalism on the part of masters toward a slave labor force portrayed as docile, childlike, and content in their bondage. As a counterpoint to Mitchell, chapter one also examines W.E.B. DuBois's classic study *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), which portrays slavery as an exploitative labor system and an anomaly in a nation where government supposedly derives from the consent of the governed. DuBois argues that pecuniary interests motivated the expropriation of slave labor (not paternalism as Phillips had argued) and that slavery was the direct cause of the Civil War, which DuBois also characterizes as a massive labor strike. The outcome of the war, according to DuBois, was the result of black labor performed on behalf of the Union. Though his book ends with a critical review of contemporary histories of the Philips model, the initial scholarly reception of *Black Reconstruction* was perhaps best anticipated by the disclaimer DuBois felt obligated to include at the beginning of the text—that he was “going to tell this story as though Negroes were

ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience.”<sup>31</sup>

As slavery scholarship also informs the cultural understanding of slavery and bears on the other works considered here, it is useful to take a moment to further consider the historiography of academic slavery studies. In *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), Herbert Aptheker argues that the slave resistance evidenced in the historical record refuted any suggestion of a contented slave force. In *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), Kenneth Stampp similarly disputed the notion of benevolent paternalism and argued that the master’s power over the slave was almost absolute. Still, Phillips’s influence over the field persisted at least until the publication of Stanley Elkins’s *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959). Here, Elkins ignores the temporal and spatial specificities that define historical scholarship and substitutes the psychoanalytic studies of Holocaust survivors for the psychological profiles of slaves in order to argue for the traumatic effects of the Middle Passage in creating the “Sambo” stereotype depicted in Phillips’s work. Elkins also fails to interrogate the historical construction of this stereotype and assumes that because it exists, it must be an accurate representation. Thus, while Elkins seeks to demonstrate the psychological violence of slavery, he merely succeeds in reifying the stereotypes portrayed by U.B. Phillips a half century earlier. Controversy over William Styron’s novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, turned in part on Styron’s ill-advised deferral to Elkins’s *Slavery* as the authoritative text on the psychological effects of slavery.

Not until the initial 1972 publication and 1979 revision of John Blassingame’s *The Slave Community*, was slaves’ experience of bondage afforded extended consideration. Blassingame drew much of his evidence from narratives written or dictated by antebellum fugitive slaves. These sources had been dismissed by most earlier historians as abolitionist propaganda, though these same scholars routinely utilized planter records without the same concern for bias. Blassingame also asserted for the

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<sup>31</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935; repr., New York: Free Press, 1998), vii.

first time the survival of African traditions in the music, dance, and language of U.S. slave culture that in turn influenced broader regional customs in the American South.<sup>32</sup>

In the 1970s Peter Wood's *Black Majority* (1974) and Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975) suggested the historical process by which slavery became a racialized institution. Morgan, like David Davis before him in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966), grappled with the fundamental contradiction between the principals of the U.S. founding and the existence of slavery in the new republic. Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll* (1974) offered a concept of the master-slave power dynamic in which the master's power was absolute, the institution never changed over time, and in the absence of a full-scale revolution, slave resistance was never successful. In addition, Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1977), written largely as a response to the 1965 Moynihan Report, marked the beginning of a series of studies about the slave family. Around the same time, Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) offered a fictional, multigenerational account of an African American family in slavery.

The 1970s also produced several studies on the role of Native Americans in the history of slavery—R. Halliburton's *Red Over Black* (1977); Theda Perdue's *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society* (1979); and Daniel Littlefield's *Africans and Seminoles* (1977), *The Cherokee Freedmen* (1978), and *The Chickasaw Freedman* (1980). While these early studies focused on the role of Native Americans as slaveholders, more recent work has examined the enslavement of Native Americans, such as Alan Gallay's *The Indian Slave Trade* (2002) and Tiya Miles's "Uncle Tom was an Indian: Tracing the Red in Black Slavery" in James F. Brooks's *Confounding the Color Line* (2002). In terms of literary and film representations of slavery, however, the role of Native Americans has yet to be incorporated in any significant way.

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<sup>32</sup> John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3-48.

After the publication of *Slave Culture*, more than a decade passed until Jacqueline Jones, in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985), and Deborah Gray White, in *Aren't I a Woman* (1985) began to examine how women's experience of bondage differed from that of men. Margaret Walker's 1966 novel *Jubilee* anticipated these developments with a story that focuses primarily on the life of the slave woman Vyry. Walker depicts aspects of slave community and resistance and begins the novel with a deathbed scene conveying the sexual abuse endured by Vyry's mother.

Much of the scholarship of the 1990s disputed Genovese's conclusions. Historians highlighted a constant renegotiation of power between masters and slaves. Several studies also focused on individual slave rebellions. These include *Rumor of Revolt* (1990), *Gabriel's Rebellion* (1993), *Tumult and Silence and Second Creek* (1993), and *Ploughshares into Swords* (1997). Phillip Morgan's *Slave Counterpoint* (1998) as well as Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone* (1998) and *Generations of Captivity* (2000) all consider how slavery, far from being static and uniform, was characterized by the specificities of time and place and changed over time. Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul* (2000) examines the moment of the slave sale from multiple perspectives and concludes that though slaves never achieved a massive revolt—the only form and scale of resistance Genovese finds noteworthy—their ability, on occasion, to shape their own sales constituted an assertion of agency and a form of resistance that could sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

In the 1930s, at the same time *Gone With the Wind* dominated the bestseller lists, workers at the Federal Writer's Project interviewed ex-slaves and recorded their memories for *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews With Former Slaves*. Though the interviews would not be widely available until the 1970s, former slaves' recollections of their lives in bondage often included tales of physical abuse, families torn apart by slave sales, and negotiations of power between masters and bondspeople that bore little resemblance to life at Tara. Chapter two examines the ex-slave interviews, specifically those recorded in Margaret Mitchell's home state of

Georgia, as well as Richard Wright's account of slavery and African American history in *Twelve Million Black Voices*. Wright had already achieved success with the novel *Native Son* when he wrote the text to accompany a selection of photographs taken at the direction of the Farm Security Administration. In addition, his subsequent bestselling autobiography *Black Boy*, though not widely regarded as a book about slavery, links Wright's experience in the Jim Crow South—a virtual slavery, according to the author—to the chattel bondage survived by his maternal grandparents. The grandparents' largely unspoken experience of slavery and the linguistic violence that permeates the text signifies the cultural suppression of slaves' narratives on a larger scale. The story of Wright's grandfather, a Civil War veteran who was denied pension benefits, declared amid World War II the country's unfulfilled obligations toward its black veterans.

Just as *Absalom, Absalom!* underwent a positive and enduring reassessment, other narratives enjoyed a brief period of acclaim and then declined in popularity. Praise for MacKinlay Kantor's bestselling *Andersonville* culminated in a Pulitzer Prize, but sixty years later, the novel can hardly be said to have maintained its initial standing among critics and readers. Yet in 1955, Kantor's novel about the infamous Confederate prison was praised as an innovation in Civil War fiction. The novel's detractors criticized the gritty details of camp life, but no one seemed to notice the reprocessed themes of planter paternalism or sectional reconciliation. Chapter three reads Kantor's body of Civil War writing, including *Andersonville* and *If the South Had Won the Civil War*—a counterfactual tale of Confederate victory and inevitable U.S. reunion written on the eve of the centennial—against three works by Robert Penn Warren. The famous Cass Mastern episode of *All the Kings Men* and the lesser known novel *Band of Angels* demonstrate a view of slavery and the Civil War that culminates in Warren's meditation on Civil War memory, *The Legacy of the Civil War*. Written on the occasion of the centennial, *Legacy* probes America's persistent fascination with the Civil War. It also invokes the Cold War to disabuse readers of long-held myths about the Civil War's inevitability and the tendency,



North and South, to reallocate blame so that no one bore responsibility for the war or its consequences. His condemnation of white supremacists who oppose school integration extends Warren's analysis of the Civil War's legacy to the civil rights movement, which also informs the conclusion of *Band of Angels*. In both texts, Warren's concern with narrative repetition suggests national dysfunction and the country's inability to truly come to terms with its past.

Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* also employs narrative repetition but to highlight the continuity between the protagonist's experience of enslavement and the postwar terrorist violence of the Ku Klux Klan. At the time of its publication, Walker's novel received positive reviews, but it did not receive the attention afforded *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, published the following year. Chapter four explores the deeper significance of *Jubilee* as a partial product of African American oral history that espouses a clear emancipationist view of the war. Researched and written over thirty years, the novel's first full draft was completed as Walker's graduate dissertation. Though Walker had written and revised the antebellum section several times, she wrote the final two sections on the Civil War and Reconstruction during the last year of the centennial. With the possible exception of the television miniseries *Roots*, no other work in this study deals as extensively with the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan. To whatever degree Walker's account is based on the experience of her ancestors—her great-grandfather's name appears in Congressional records as a victim of the Klan—the violent, often deadly opposition of white supremacists to the 1960s civil rights movement was also very much on Walker's mind as she worked to complete her Ph.D. and the manuscript of *Jubilee*.

After the centennial, interest in the Civil War waned and few publications explored the conflict, with the notable exception of Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*. The 1974 novel about the battle of Gettysburg revises timeworn Civil War narratives by reimagining the notion of "The Soldier's Faith," finding fault with Lee's generalship, and identifying slavery as the central political issue of the war. At the same time, however, the sudden appearance of a man presumed to be a runaway slave exposes the

racism of Union soldiers and Gettysburg residents. The cynicism of Shaara's Civil War novel bears a striking resemblance to much of the literature of the Vietnam War. In addition to tracing the book's long rise to popularity, chapter six lays the groundwork for a discussion of 1990s Civil War memory, much of which was generated as a direct response to Michael Shaara. Ken Burns cited Shaara's novel as his inspiration for undertaking his best known documentary, *The Civil War*. When the *Killer Angels* was adapted as the film *Gettysburg* and Shaara's son published two companion novels, however, Michael Shaara's criticism of U.S. hypocrisy was transformed into a filmic celebration of noble Confederate sacrifice and a series of books billed as a "trilogy" that ultimately contradicts the core narrative of *The Killer Angels*.

Meanwhile, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, William Styron's 1967 novel about the leader of the 1833 slave revolt in Southampton, Virginia, incited a contentious debate over the novel's depiction of slavery and a representation of Turner that, according to many detractors, defamed the memory of a black folk hero. One of the most criticized elements of the novel was Styron's hypothesis that Turner murdered Margaret Whitehead, the only person he is known to have killed during the revolt, because he was in love with her. A considerable amount of scholarship has synthesized the multiple waves of criticism about the novel. While I have not overlooked this important reception history, chapter five also highlights Styron's conflation of religion, sex, and violence in planning and carrying out the revolt. It also explores a challenge to Turner's leadership and a crisis of faith that anticipate themes of *The Killer Angels*. Most importantly, it reads Styron's novel as an account of slavery as an overwhelmingly oppressive institution but one that often reduces black characters to stereotypes.

*Roots*, inspired by family stories Alex Haley heard as a child, follows seven generations of an African American family, beginning with the slave youth Kunta Kinte, who is kidnapped by slave traders in Gambia and carried to colonial Virginia in the hold of a slave ship. The miniseries based on Haley's bestselling book captivated the country and related more than two hundred years of slaves'

experience to unprecedented millions of television viewers. Part of the appeal of *Roots* was that it was marketed as the story of Haley's own family. Not only were the main characters said to have been based on the author's ancestors, Haley also wrote himself and his genealogical search into the end of what is essentially a novel but one that blurs, more than most, distinctions between fact and fiction, history and myth.

While Haley's book is especially attuned to issues of acculturation and the survival of African traditions in U.S. slave culture, it is also more concerned with male members of the Kinte lineage. As slavery scholarship of the 1980s began to consider how the experience of slave women differed from that of slave men, particularly due to childbearing and childcare responsibilities, literary scholar Sherley Anne Williams published a novel that begins with conversations between a white interviewer and a pregnant slave revolt participant who has been sentenced to death but whose execution has been delayed until the birth of her child. Like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Williams's novel represents slaves' traumatic memory of bondage. Though it did not match the popularity of Morrison's novel, *Dessa Rose* is included in this study as an important response to earlier accounts of slavery, particularly those Williams suggests as enacting a kind of textual enslavement. The initial premise of *Dessa Rose* is based on a short story Williams wrote in response to Styron's *Confessions*. The opening scenario is similar to that of *The Confessions*, but in *Dessa Rose*, the title character assumes narrative control and ultimately achieves autonomy from the white male writer who presumes to "read" her and write her story. Williams's novel also uses Dessa's recollections of her mother and the heartbreaking familial losses she endures to refute the myth of Mammy, the idealized female slave whose maternal devotion to the master's family is so complete, she is thought to have no family ties of her own. Williams positions Dessa's story against other slavery literature, from the antebellum slave narratives to the book version of *Roots*. And like the miniseries *Roots*, *Dessa Rose* comments on the possibilities of interracial friendship. A slave sale scam, reminiscent of Rosa Millard's swindle of the Union army in Faulkner's

*The Unvanquished*, is carried out by Dessa and her fellow runaways with the help of a white planter woman. Together, the conspirators exact remuneration from the system that enslaved them.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is first and foremost a novel about remembering the trauma of slavery. The narrative structure of the novel, which is inspired by the true incident of a slave mother who killed her child rather than have her returned to slavery, imitates the process of individual cognitive memory as Morrison reveals in fragments the story of Sethe's enslaved past and her rationale at the moment of infanticide. The novel emphasizes slavery's effect on mother-child relationships, especially young Sethe's alienation from her mother, multiple instances of infanticide as a reaction to sexual abuse, and Sethe's calculation that death is preferable to allowing her children to be re-enslaved.

In the 1990s, Ken Burn's documentary *The Civil War* fueled a resurgence of interest in the conflict. An analysis of the film adaptation *Gettysburg* and two novels by Jeff Shaara, *Gods and Generals* and *The Last Full Measure*, explore how, amid this Civil War revival, Michael Shaara's criticism of American hypocrisy in *The Killer Angels* was reimagined as a celebration of Confederate bravery in the face of futility at Gettysburg and, ultimately, a story of white reunion. Toward the end of the decade, Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* shifted the focus away from battle narratives with the story of a Confederate deserter who attempts to recover from physical and psychological wounds he sustained in a war that he cannot explain why he fought. Inman's view of humanity as degraded and depraved essentially picks up where *The Killer Angels* concludes. His quest for spiritual rebirth as described in the Cherokee mythology he learned as a youth leads Inman to set out for the Blue Ridge Mountains, though his journey often leads him to question whether redemption is even possible. Slaves make few appearances in the novel and then only as minor characters, but slavery as the national iniquity is a consummate, if unspoken, presence that underlies the novel's concern with social class. A retelling of an incident from Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, along with crucial references to Cherokee mythology and Native American relocation, cast the Civil War in a

broader framework of immorality that predates the existence of the United States as a nation.

Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* intended to correct through parody the portrait of slavery, Civil War, and Reconstruction portrayed in *Gone With the Wind*. A copyright lawsuit filed on behalf of Mitchell's heirs temporarily stopped the publication of Randall's novel. In a case that held important implications for the politics of cultural memory, an appellate court recognized *The Wind Done Gone* as parody and therefore a protected form of criticism. Randall's novel is told in the form of a fictional diary, authored by the biracial half-sister of her analogue to Scarlett O'Hara. For Cynara, the emotional pain of her enslaved experience derives from her sense of maternal alienation. For years, she watched her mother dote on her half-sister, whom Cynara believed her mother preferred, until her father, Planter, sent Cynara away to become the concubine of another planter's son. While exploring the filial relationships behind the troubled Mammy myth, Randall also reimagines some of Mitchell's most recognizable characters. She restores, for instance, the individual identity of Cynara's mother, Pallas, and the cleverness of Miss Priss, whose *Gone With the Wind* counterpart is regarded as one of the novel and film's most degrading black characters. Ultimately, *The Wind Done Gone* refutes Mitchell's account of Reconstruction in the figure of the accomplished black congressman Adam Conyers. Invoking the term first used by Ashley Wilkes to characterize Confederate defeat, Randall also recasts the defeat of Reconstruction as the African American Götterdämmerung.

The final three chapters follow the cultural memory of slavery and the Civil War into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with three relatively recent texts: Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*, Geraldine Brooks's *March*, and E.L. Doctorow's *The March*. *The Known World* provides a panoramic portrait of a Virginia slave community, including free blacks, black slaveholders, poor whites, and the county's richest planter, who believes his authority supersedes civil law. Geraldine Brooks's *March* relates the Civil War experience of the father of *Little Women*. While slavery is largely absent from Alcott's novel, Brooks reimagines the March parents as ardent abolitionists and runaway slaves as a regular presence

in the March home. She also draws on her experience as a war correspondent to raise difficult questions about the ethics of war. The idea for *March* was born of Brooks's reluctant foray into Civil War memory while her spouse Tony Horwitz researched *Confederates in the Attic*. Brooks's novel ultimately illustrates the process of memory formation and suppression as the March parents withhold troubling details about their involvement with slavery, March's war experience, and events at the Washington hospital where March convalesces from a fever. Much of what goes unspoken by the parents involves former slave Grace Clement, whom March knew in his youth and meets again during his service as an army chaplain. Grace's partially suppressed family story, together with the silences in the March family, represent the formation of a national war narrative that largely excludes slavery. Meanwhile, in E.L. Doctorow's *The March*, about Sherman's campaign through Georgia and the Carolinas, a soldier who suffers an untreatable head injury embodies conflicting memorial impulses of a nation that, according to Doctorow, has lost its sense of identity.

From *The Wind Done Gone* to *The March*, each novel conjures in order to revise elements of the Sutpen myth of *Absalom, Absalom!* In *The Known World*, the thwarted ambitions of slaveowner Henry Townsend and his bondsman Moses—who at one point engage in a wrestling match—recall Thomas Sutpen's failed dynastic vision and his physical combat with slaves. Like Randall's Cynara, who struggles with filial denial—and Margaret Walker's Vyry before them—the flight of the Jameson family from Fieldstone finds Doctorow's Pearl awaiting some acknowledgement by her father, just as one version of the Sutpen myth has Charles Bon searching unsuccessfully for the slightest hint of paternal recognition from Thomas Sutpen. The decline of the Clement family, as told by Grace in *March*, and the implied sexual assault by Grace's half-brother, who dies under mysterious circumstances, represents a reimagining of Faulkner's tale, in which Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon judge miscegenation to have trumped incest as Henry Sutpen's motive for fratricide.

Certain recurring motifs illuminate these authors' and filmmakers' revision of earlier works.

The politics of hunger is a recurring theme, as is the trope of disease. Physical wounds are often conflated with psychological trauma, and frequently psychological disorders afflict dispossessed Confederates who appear to seek refuge in the delusion of an untroubled past. One notable exception is the slave Alice, of *The Known World*, whose eccentric behavior proves to be both feigned and a sustained form of resistance. Finally, a surprising number of works from the first chapter to the last have commented on individual memory, collective memory, or both. In such cases, I have sought to understand not only the narrative's influence on the cultural understanding of slavery and the Civil War but also its implications for the representation of memory.

## Chapter 1

### The 1930s: Margaret Mitchell, W.E.B. DuBois, and the Works of William Faulkner

On June 30, 1936, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* was released to the public. The Book of the Month Club selection quickly topped the bestseller lists and in six months sold more than one million copies.<sup>1</sup> On the question of literary merit, reviews were mixed, but no one could dispute the sheer cultural force of Mitchell's novel, which went on to win the 1937 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Since then, the novel has been translated into at least twenty-seven languages; and more than thirty million copies are in print worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Adjusted for inflation, the 1939 film adaptation remains the highest grossing film of all time.<sup>3</sup> After its initial success, Mitchell's novel twice regained its former bestseller status—in 1986 with a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition and again in 1991 with the release of Alexandra Ripley's sequel *Scarlett*.<sup>4</sup> The influence of *Gone With the Wind* has been multigenerational, and rarely has its popularity been rivaled in scope or longevity.

Margaret Mitchell composed the bulk of *Gone With the Wind* over a three-year period from 1926 to 1929. Though the author was reluctant to discuss the book with anyone but her husband, Lois Cole, a friend of Mitchell's who worked for the Macmillan Company, alerted the editor and chief that Mitchell might have a manuscript that could be of interest to the publisher. When he visited Atlanta on

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<sup>1</sup> "Best-Sellers: 'Gone with the Wind' Passes Million Mark in Six Months," *Literary Digest* 122 (December 26, 1936): 24, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: Gone with the Wind and Its Female Fans* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 1-2; Ellen F. Brown and John Wiley, Jr. *Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind: A Bestseller's Odyssey from Atlanta to Hollywood* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2011), 321.

<sup>3</sup> David Leonhardt, "Why Avatar is Not the Top-Grossing Film," *New York Times*, March 1, 2010, <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/01/why-avatar-is-not-the-top-grossing-film/>, accessed September 24, 2013; "Domestic Grosses Adjusted for Ticket Price Inflation," *Box Office Mojo*, <http://boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm>, accessed September 24, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Brown and Wiley, *Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind*, 305, 310; Edwin McDowell, "'Gone With the Wind' Bestseller Again at 50," *New York Times*, June 25, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/24/books/gone-with-the-wind-best-seller-again-at-50.html>; "Bestsellers: November 17, 1991," *New York Times*, November 17, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/17/books/best-sellers-november-17-1991.html>.



a scouting trip to discover new authors, Harold Latham repeatedly asked Mitchell about the novel she was rumored to have written. Mitchell evaded Latham's inquiries until the day of his scheduled departure, when she impulsively collected the manila envelopes that contained her chapter drafts and delivered the manuscript to Latham's hotel lobby.<sup>5</sup>

The timing of the publication led many of Mitchell's audience to read *GWTW* as an allegory for their own struggles amid the hard times of the Great Depression. In reality, Mitchell began her novel at the height of the jazz age and had nearly completed it by the time the Depression began. As Mitchell explained of *Gone With the Wind*, "When I wrote it everyone thought the boom was here to stay. But I wrote about another world that blew up under the unsuspecting feet of our grandparents, without any idea that the world in which I lived would blow up shortly."<sup>6</sup> At least part of the novel's appeal may have been what Mitchell identified as its central theme: "survival." As Mitchell explained in a radio interview in 1936, she had long been fascinated by the question, "What quality is it that makes some people able to survive catastrophes and others, apparently just as brave and able and strong, go under?" Asserting that the phenomenon could be observed in the Depression as well, Mitchell contended, "It happens in every social upheaval, in wars, in panics, in revolutions." In terms of the novel, she asked, "What was it that made our Southern people able to come through a war, a Reconstruction and the complete wrecking of all our social and economic systems?" She had no definitive answers, but she knew that "survivors of the Civil War used to call that quality 'gumption.'"<sup>7</sup>

For Mitchell, the Civil War was a matter of family lore. As she wrote to one correspondent, "I

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<sup>5</sup> Brown and Wiley, *Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind*, 12, 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Mitchell, *Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind Letters, 1936-1949*, ed. Richard Harwell (New York: Collier Books, 1986), 115.

<sup>7</sup> "Margaret Mitchell: American Rebel: Interview With Margaret Mitchell from 1936," transcript of 1936 radio interview by Medora Perkerson," PBS.org, March 12, 2012, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/margaret-mitchell-american-rebel/interview-with-margaret-mitchell-from-1936/2011>. Mitchell biographer Anne Edwards attributes similar comments to Mitchell's conversation with Harold Latham when the author delivered her manuscript to Latham's hotel lobby; Anne Edwards, *Road to Tara: The Life of Margaret Mitchell* (New Haven, CT: Ticknor & Fields, 1983), 11.

heard so much when I was little about fighting and the hard times after the war that I firmly believed Mother and Father had been through it all instead of being born long afterward.” The world her family recreated was so vivid, Mitchell said, she was ten years old before she realized that the war had not ended just before she was born.<sup>8</sup> She recalled, as a child, sitting on the laps of old veterans and great aunts, storytellers all. They talked of visits from Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens and told stories about how women stuffed wrapping paper in their corsets to keep warm when woolen fabric was impossible to obtain. They also related how Mitchell’s grandfather was struck by a bullet at Sharpsburg and walked fifty miles with his skull fractured in two places. “They didn’t talk of these happenings as history nor as remarkable events,” Mitchell explained, “but just as part of their lives and not especially epic parts. And they just gradually became part of my life.”<sup>9</sup> As a child, Mitchell dug bullets out of old breastworks and read *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*. By her own account, she was “raised on” Eliza Andrews’s *The War-Time Journal of Georgia Girl*. Years later, as a reporter for the *Atlanta Journal*, Mitchell often queried the city’s elder residents about their Civil War experiences. She liked to hear the stories, though they rarely pertained to the profiles she eventually wrote for the newspaper.<sup>10</sup>

The strongest impression, however, was made by Mitchell’s mother. Frustrated by her struggles with arithmetic, six-year-old Margaret Mitchell insisted she would not go to school. To instill in her the value of an education, May Belle Mitchell drove her daughter out to the Jonesboro road—the very route Scarlett takes in her harrowing flight from Atlanta—and showed the child the ruins of “old houses where fine and wealthy people had once lived.” Of this outing, the adult Mitchell recalled, “Some of the ruins dated from Sherman’s visit, some had fallen to pieces when the families in them fell

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<sup>8</sup> Mitchell and Harwell, *Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind Letters*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 294, 14, 5.

to pieces. And she showed me plenty of houses still standing staunchly. And she talked about the world those people had lived in, such a secure world, and how it had exploded beneath them. And she told me that my own world was going to explode under me, some day, and God help me if I didn't have some weapon to meet the new world."<sup>11</sup> Her mother's lecture registered the individual's, particularly women's, precarious place in an unstable cosmos and stressed "the necessity of having an education, both classical and practical." May Belle Mitchell warned, "all that would be left after a world ended would be what you could do with your hands and what you had in your head." Directing her daughter to "go to school and learn something that will stay with you," she maintained, "The strength of women's hands isn't worth anything but what they've got in their heads will carry them as far as they need to go."<sup>12</sup> According to Mitchell biographer Darden Pyron, this social history lesson was to *Gone With the Wind* what Caddie Compson's muddy drawers were to the *The Sound and the Fury*.<sup>13</sup> That novel, which introduced the principal narrator of *Absalom, Absalom!*, began, according to Faulkner, with the tableau of a young Caddy Compson, clad in muddy drawers, climbing a pear tree to observe her grandmother's funeral.<sup>14</sup> A version of May Belle Mitchell's speech appears in *GWTW*, while the novel also adopts her view of the Civil War as a social cataclysm that felled the comfortable world of the families who lived along the Jonesboro road.

As Margaret Mitchell imagines this period of social upheaval, her narrative is most concerned with the ordeal of Southern white slaveholders. *Gone With the Wind* figures the war, emancipation, and Reconstruction as crucibles of their suffering. After his return from a Union prison camp, Ashley

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>13</sup> Darden Asbury Pyron, *Southern Daughter: The Life of Margaret Mitchell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 267.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. and William Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University*, eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 1.

Wilkes, the object of Scarlett O'Hara's unrequited affection, contemplates the fate of the defeated South. "In the end what will happen will be what has happened whenever a civilization breaks up," predicts Ashley. "The people who have brains and courage come through and the ones who haven't are winnowed out. At least, it has been interesting, if not comfortable, to witness a *Götterdämmerung*." Explaining the term as a "dusk of the gods,"—in German mythology, a destruction of the gods in an apocalyptic battle against evil—Ashley laments, "Unfortunately, we Southerners did think we were gods."<sup>15</sup> In a later scene, Rhett Butler delivers a speech modeled after the one Mitchell heard as a child<sup>16</sup> and that also ironically echoes the ruminations of Ashley Wilkes. As he attempts to disabuse his wife of her infatuation with Ashley, Rhett ventriloquizes May Belle Mitchell's philosophy of a world turned upside down in terms that bode poorly for his rival:

Ashley Wilkes—bah! His breed is of no use or value in an upside-down world like ours. Whenever the world up-ends, his kind is the first to perish. ... They don't deserve to survive because they won't fight—don't know how to fight. This isn't the first time the world's been upside down and it won't be the last. It's happened before and it'll happen again. And when it does happen, everyone loses everything and everyone is equal. And then they all start again at taw, with nothing at all. That is, nothing except the cunning of their brains and strength of their hands. But some people, like Ashley, have neither cunning nor strength or, having them, scruple to use them. And so they go under and they should go under. It's a natural law and the world is better off without them. But there are always a hardy few who come through and, given time, they are right back where they were before the world turned over (*GWTW*, 772).

Despite Rhett's assertion that the likes of Ashley Wilkes have no place in the new social order, the two men articulate a remarkably similar assessment of the postwar South.

If Mitchell's narrative is ultimately about who survives—and why—when the world up-ends, then no one in the novel surpasses Scarlett O'Hara for "gumption." As this quality leads her to violate every one of her society's percepts, particularly regarding the standards of feminine behavior, Scarlett

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<sup>15</sup> Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (1936; repr., New York: Warner Books, 1999), 527. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *GWTW*.

<sup>16</sup> Pyron, *Southern Daughter*, 45.

offended some readers, who openly denounced her as a “bad woman.”<sup>17</sup> One reader, who identified herself only as “Southern Woman” wrote to the *Washington Post* recommending all editions of *Gone With the Wind* be “consigned to a large bonfire” for its “vulgar and coarse portrayal of women,” which she found particularly prevalent in Scarlett.<sup>18</sup> Mitchell lamented that critics like “Southern Woman” overlooked the virtues of her other female characters, particularly, Ellen Robillard O’Hara, the mother whom Scarlett, as a child, had confused with the Virgin Mary; the bondswoman known only as Mammy, who represents the archetypical loyal slave of plantation fiction; and Melanie Wilkes, whom the author at times claimed as her true heroine.<sup>19</sup> Whether or not Mitchell actually expected to placate Scarlett’s detractors with the likes of Ellen, Mammy, and Melanie, each of these three women either enforces or embodies a model of womanhood that Scarlett ultimately repudiates as an encumbrance to survival. With Ellen’s example of an “unselfish and forbearing nature,” she and Mammy impose a code of conduct that requires Scarlett to be kind, gentle, demure, and to conceal her true intelligence in the company of suitors (*GWTW*, 59). Scarlett apparently learns to affect the outward signs of the nineteenth’s century’s feminine ideal; but in her most abject moments, after a homecoming that places her at the head of a family in ruins, Scarlett comes to the realization that her mother betrayed her with an education in Southern ladyhood that proves useless in a postwar, post-slavery world.

Long before that repudiation, Mitchell’s account of Scarlett’s first wedding, pregnancy, and the death of her husband suggests marriage and motherhood as forms of unfreedom. When Charles Hamilton dies seven weeks after their wedding from pneumonia—not an ostensibly more heroic battle wound—Scarlett is “relieved to be released from the bonds” of marriage, but the discovery that she is pregnant makes her “[weep] with despair” and “[wish] that she were dead,” out of certainty that she

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<sup>17</sup> Mitchell and Harwell, *Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind Letters*, 123.

<sup>18</sup> Southern Woman, “Southern Women Defamed,” letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, November 24, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell and Harwell, *Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind Letters*, 126.

will never again know the “freedom of her unmarried days” (*GWTW*, 128). This period of mourning, supposedly for her dead husband but really for her own lost youth, reveals Scarlett’s inward revolt against the social proscriptions on every stage in the lives of planter women. Marriage, widowhood, especially motherhood, and even the belle years she yearns to recapture, each prescribes a decorum Scarlett deems oppressive.

In the course of the novel, Mitchell acknowledged, Scarlett “does practically everything a lady of the old school should not do.”<sup>20</sup> In part, that means violating the social code of her ex-planter cohort, which demands “Reverence for the Confederacy, honor to the veterans, loyalty to old forms, pride in poverty, open hands to friends and undying hatred to Yankees” (*GWTW*, 840). Despite the cajoling of her second husband, Frank Kennedy, Scarlett refuses to relinquish the management of her lumber business either during her second pregnancy or after the birth of her eldest daughter. Scarlett’s rejection of domesticity, motherhood, and spousal obedience incenses her fellow Atlantans, who interpret Scarlett’s “unwomanly” behavior as an unseemly attempt to “unsex herself” (*GWTW* 637, 641). From Scarlett’s juvenile disregard of Mammy’s mandate to “ack lak a lil lady” to Gerald’s treatment of his daughter with a “man to man manner,” the characterization of Scarlett as a masculine figure—part of a larger pattern of gender reversals—begins long before her sudden poverty compels Scarlett to renounce her mother’s model of white womanhood (*GWTW*, 30, 58).<sup>21</sup> Scarlett’s public transgressions of her culture’s conduct code, particularly regarding gendered behavior, and the disapproval she provokes from the Atlanta “Old Guard” highlight Scarlett’s dissent from the society of her birth. That division and the politics of spousal discord figure prominently in Mitchell’s commentary on Civil War memory.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>21</sup> On gender reversals see Elizabeth Young, *Disarming the Nation: Women’s Writing and the American Civil War*, pbk. ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 250-257.

In novels of the romance genre, marriage is usually the means by which the story draws to a satisfying conclusion. Northern romances of the post-Civil war era often conclude with the marriage of a Northern man and a Southern woman as a metaphor for national reconciliation.<sup>22</sup> Unions, however, do not fare well in *Gone With the Wind*. Mitchell wrote her last chapter first, knowing from the outset that her story would end in the breakup of a marriage.<sup>23</sup> In a novel where sectional antipathy remains the dogma of the postwar South, marriage rarely, if ever, produces the kind of amicable relations that North-South nuptials achieve in Northern romances. From Gerald O'Hara's admonishment at the start of the novel that "there can only be happiness in a marriage when like marries like" to Ashley's rejection of Scarlett's proposal on the grounds that "there can't be any peace unless two people are alike," to Rhett's final rebuke, that happiness can only exist when "like mates like," the novel is deeply concerned with marital incompatibility. The wedding of Clayton County belle Cathleen Calvert to the former "Yankee" overseer Hamilton conflates an unthinkable breach of class with the aforementioned sectional marriage. Ellen O'Hara's family, the French-descended Savannah Robillards, regard Scarlett as the product of a *mésalliance* with her Irish immigrant father. While the implied incongruity between Scarlett and Ashley and later Scarlett and Rhett may evoke both men's descent from long established gentry in Virginia and Charleston, it also implies differing value systems that speak to a South unable to reconcile its pre- and postwar identities.

In *Gone With the Wind*, the most prominent trans-regional alliances are not domestic but commercial. Rhett relies on Northern suppliers for wartime blockade runs, and Scarlett's postwar

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<sup>22</sup> Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> Troubled by the unconventional conclusion made ambiguous by Scarlett's vow to win back her estranged husband, readers bombarded the author with letters and telegrams and accosted her on the street demanding to be told whether Rhett and Scarlett reconciled. Mitchell maintained that she had written all she knew, but continuing to deny readers the resolution they found absent from the novel probably only heightened the public's obsession. Lamar O. Ball, "Margaret Mitchell Tells World Path to Glory is Full of Bumps," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 8, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Constitution.

lumber business thrives on a clientele of Northern émigrés. All of these transactions are scorned by the white Georgians whose social code demands “undying hatred of Yankees.” Scarlett’s professional and later personal associations with “Yankees”—a term itself suggestive of contempt—are among the leading causes of her eventual estrangement from Atlanta’s ex-planters.<sup>24</sup>

During the war, Scarlett does not share the same devotion to the Confederate cause as other women of Atlanta. While her colleagues perform their nursing duties with “enthusiasm” that seems “nothing short of fanatic,” Scarlett spends four mornings a week in the “sweltering, stinking hospital,” only “because she [doesn’t] know to get out of it.” According to Mitchell, Scarlett’s fellow volunteers “took it for granted that she was imbued with their own patriotic fervor and would have been shocked to know how slight an interest in the war she had” (*GWTW*, 158). Though Melanie and Scarlett are supposed to be in mourning for Charles Hamilton, a society matron persuades them to work a hospital bazaar with the argument that “there isn’t any sacrifice too great for the Cause” (*GWTW*, 165). While Scarlett is pleased to attend a social event, she becomes “bewildered and depressed” to discover the other women “blazing with an emotion she [does] not feel.” To Scarlett, the “white heat of devotion to the Cause” exuded by her peers seems “silly.” In a rare moment of self-awareness, Scarlett realizes that she “[does] not share with these women their fierce pride, their desire to sacrifice themselves and everything they had for the Cause.” While her peers consider it something “sacred,” to Scarlett, “the Cause meant nothing at all.” While not yet openly defiant of the “Old Guard,” Scarlett resolves to “go on making a pretense” of her “enthusiasm and pride in the Cause” (*GWTW*, 172). In doing so, she likely delays ruffling the likes of Mrs. Merriwether, who later says of Rhett Butler, “Any man who does not think our Cause is just and holy should be hanged!” (*GWTW*, 233).

After the war, when the women of the Atlanta “Old Guard” transform the Lost Cause into a

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<sup>24</sup> According to local gossip, “The Yankees raped women and ran bayonets through children’s stomachs and burned houses over the head of old people”; however these offenses are rumored to have happened in Virginia, Louisiana, or Tennessee but “never very close to home.” *GWTW*, 338.



communal fetish, sanctifying flags, graves, battlefields, and other relics, Scarlett rejects this Confederate nationalism run amuck, just as surely as she rejects her mother's model of feminine behavior. In her early efforts to revive her family's estate, she refuses to save a pile of Confederate money as a keepsake for her son Wade and designates the worthless paper for patching cracks in Tara's roof. With survival her first priority, Scarlett withdraws her pathos from the bereaved Tarleton family when she learns they have paid to bring home the bodies of three of their dead sons—the fourth was never found—and to erect monuments in the family cemetery. "Anybody," Scarlett fumes, "who would waste precious money on tombstones when food was so dear, didn't deserve sympathy" (*GWTW*, 495). Her further indignation over the wordiness of the inscriptions, which she calculates costs extra, pits Scarlett's economic practicality against the family's funerary extravagance. Later, as her fellow Atlantans take up the work of the graves decoration society conceived by Melanie Wilkes, women of the "Old Guard" obsess about a past that Scarlett would rather not recall. As former Confederates chronically re-fight the war, pondering the "what if" possibilities and alternate outcomes, a horrified Scarlett predicts that their children will think "it was wonderful and glorious to fight the Yankees and come home blind and crippled—or not come home at all" (*GWTW*, 740). Several chapters later, when she arrives at the Wilkes house to pick up Wade, she interrupts a play enactment of Gettysburg that casts Beau Wilkes as General Lee, her own son as Pickett, and Melanie Wilkes as the Yankees who have taken the brunt of the battle (*GWTW*, 957). After the real battle of Gettysburg, Mitchell's Atlantans desperately wait for casualty lists to confirm their loved ones' safety. More often, they receive devastating reports like the deaths of the last three Tarleton sons, whose brother died in the first year of the war. To Mitchell's ex-Confederates, Gettysburg represents the turning point of their defeat and the battle most associated with personal loss. As the battle is refought in Melanie Wilkes's living room, the fantasy play allows Melanie and the boys to achieve an alternate, victorious outcome, which defies Scarlett's assertion, "We were fools to fight that war. And the sooner we forget it, the better

we'll be" (*GWTW*, 740). Scarlett's position on the war clashes with that of the other women for whom the Lost Cause grows "stronger, dearer" in defeat "than it had ever been at the height of its glory." As Mitchell explains, "Everything about it [the Lost Cause] [is] sacred, the graves of the men who had died for it, the battle fields, the torn flags, the crossed sabers in their halls, the fading letters from the front, the veterans" (*GWTW*, 876). These women also consider Scarlett's association with their former adversaries such a betrayal that Scarlett, too, is "numbered among the enemy" (*GWTW*, 876).

Scarlett's experience of war, corroborated by Ashley and the elderly veteran Mr. McRae, is that it is a dirty, bloody, inglorious affair, but her objection to the Lost Cause has less to do with its interpretive distortions than with its interminable obsession with the past—that incessant look backward Scarlett vows never to take. After delivering Melanie's baby and bringing her small company safely through the army's retreat, Scarlett arrives at Tara to find her mother dead, her father mentally ill, and her sisters sick from typhoid. With the house virtually stripped of provisions by Federal soldiers who used it as their headquarters, Scarlett forages the countryside for food and finally strikes vegetables in a garden patch left by the Wilkeses' former slaves. There, as Scarlett lies prostrate in the dirt, vomiting the raw radish she has just devoured, recollections of the past and worries of the present "[circle] about her like buzzards waiting for a death" (*GWTW*, 428). Perceiving the past as lifeless and memory as a vile, carrion-feeding predator, Scarlett resolves what will distinguish her from Mitchell's other ex-Confederates: "What was past was past. Those who were dead were dead. The lazy luxury of the old days was gone, never to return. ... There was no going back and she was going forward. Throughout the South for fifty years there would be bitter-eyed women who looked backward, to dead times, to dead men, evoking memories that hurt and were futile, bearing poverty with bitter pride because they had those memories. But Scarlett was never to look back" (*GWTW*, 428). Here, too, Scarlett realizes that "nothing her mother had taught her" about the comportment of Southern women "was of any value whatsoever now" and she would have been better served by

learning to “plow or chop cotton” (*GWTW*, 434). Her epiphany is the source of conflict between Scarlett and other women of her class, whose adherence to “old forms” include the gender proscriptions Scarlett rejects and devotion to the Lost Cause that Scarlett never shares.

By contrast, the corresponding garden scene in David O. Selznick’s film adaptation contains none of Scarlett’s reflections about the past or the worthlessness of her mother’s instruction; instead, the film promotes the very nostalgia that Mitchell’s Scarlett rejects. The garden scene of the film derives its dramatic force from Scarlett’s determined declaration of survival. Rising from the dirt, fist clenched, Scarlett vows, “As God is my witness, I’ll never be hungry again.”<sup>25</sup> Though not verbatim, the spoken lines of the film closely follow Scarlett’s final ruminations in the garden scene of the novel. Both suggest hunger as the fundamental experience of planter dispossession. The film, however, does not explicitly suggest Scarlett’s rejection of the past and memory. In this respect, the film departs from the novel even before the first scene. After the opening credits, a scrolling text appears before a backdrop of slaves driving livestock from the fields. Imbued with longing for a world that no longer exists, the introduction romanticizes “a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South.” The introduction is an elegy to a lost civilization that held “the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave.” “Look for it only in books,” the film commands viewers, “for it is no more than a dream remembered. A Civilization gone with the wind.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, before any scripted action, the film version of *Gone With the Wind* encourages audiences to regard the slaveholding South with the same nostalgia that Ashley Wilkes embodies in the novel.

In *Playing the Race Card*, Linda Williams notes that Scarlett lacks insight into her own emotional life. Her belated awareness, Williams argues, facilitates the novel’s melodramatic action, as

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<sup>25</sup> “I’ll Never be Hungry Again,” *Gone With the Wind*, DVD, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> “Credits and Foreword,” *Gone With the Wind*, DVD.

in Scarlett's delayed realization that she loves Rhett, not Ashley, which occurs "too late" for reconciliation.<sup>27</sup> Through most of the novel, Scarlett's emotional obtuseness leads her to covet a man who repeatedly aligns himself with the Old South and a past, however fictional, that Scarlett otherwise repudiates. When literary critic Malcolm Cowley reviewed *GWTW* for *New Republic*, he unfavorably judged the book "an encyclopedia of the plantation legend."<sup>28</sup> Cowley's reading overlooked certain complexities introduced by Scarlett's conflicts with members of the "Old Guard"; but the plantation legend does manifest in the novel and finds its fullest incarnation in the novel's most impotent figure, Ashley Wilkes. In a wartime letter to Melanie, Ashley identifies himself with the Old South and professes devotion to "old days, the old ways I love so much" (*GWTW*, 211). His romantic recollections of plantation life include scenes of magnolias bathed in moonlight and slaves singing as they return from the fields at dusk. After the war, Ashley describes himself as a living anachronism, a product of this earlier era who finds no place in the postwar South. Ashley epitomizes the very nostalgia Scarlett abhors, but she remains oblivious to that reality until Melanie's death. The prospect of having Ashley as a lifelong dependent forces Scarlett to realize, "He never really existed at all, except in my imagination...I loved something I made up" (*GWTW*, 1016).

In a survey of readers and viewers of *Gone With the Wind* conducted by Helen Taylor in the 1980s, Ashley Wilkes emerged as the least favorite character in either the book or film. "Weak, wimpish, wishy-washy, spineless, insipid, boring, a ninny, indecisive, a failure, a moral coward" were some of the terms respondents used to describe the much-despised Ashley.<sup>29</sup> His creator, Margaret Mitchell, tired of reviewers who described Ashley in a similar fashion. Mitchell said she never thought

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<sup>27</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001), 197-200.

<sup>28</sup> Malcolm Cowley, "Going with the Wind," *New Republic*, September 16, 1936, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *Scarlett's Women*, 110.

of Ashley in terms of cowardice, only that despite his clarity of vision, he remained unable to act.<sup>30</sup>

This inaction, linked to his nostalgia for the prewar years, casts Ashley as a casualty of the social reorganization achieved by Confederate loss and emancipation. As he explains to Scarlett, “I want the old days back again and they’ll never come back, and I am haunted by the memory of them and of the world falling about my ears” (*Gone With the Wind*, 923).

Scarlett’s late realization about her infatuation with Ashley follows long after she identifies his fixation on the past as the source of Ashley’s impotence. Alone in the lumber yard office, Scarlett and Ashley’s conversation turns to his longing for the “charm,” “beauty,” and “glamour” of the “old days.” “Do you remember,” he urges. Scarlett, who “had set her face against the past” first resists with the self-admonition, “Don’t look back! Don’t look back!” but then does and regrets it almost instantly. “I shouldn’t have let him make me look back,” thinks Scarlett. “I was right when I said I’d never look back. It hurts too much, it drags at your heart till you can’t ever do anything else except look back. That’s what’s wrong with Ashley, He can’t look forward any more. He can’t see the present, he fears the future, and so he looks back” (*GWTW*, 925). Scarlett’s remembrance and mourning of the prewar years land the two in a compromising embrace that is witnessed by Ashley’s sister. While their intimacy lacks the adulterous intent that India Wilkes supposes, it does constitute a seduction of sorts and a counterpoint to the controversial, carnal scene that follows between Scarlett and Rhett. Scarlett and Ashley’s exchange occurs strictly as a shared remembrance, but it reveals Ashley’s nostalgia and regret as being entirely incompatible with Scarlett’s futurism. Though she still lacks the insight to translate this discovery into the climactic epiphany that she does not love Ashley, Scarlett at least recognizes that Ashley’s obsession with the prewar years leaves him unable to function in the postwar world. His debilitating preoccupation is also suggestive of white Georgians’—particularly deposed ex-slaveholders’—constant refighting of the war. If action or inaction determines survival in a changing

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<sup>30</sup> Mitchell and Harwell, *Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind Letters*, 121.

world, the most significant contributing factor, Mitchell seems to say, is the character's temporal bearing. Nostalgia enervates; those who orient themselves toward the past languish there.

This incompatibility of past and present, Old and New South turns up again in the Butlers' final, verbal spar. To the point of channeling Ashley Wilkes and setting out to find places where "some of the old times must still linger," Rhett, in the end, is not nearly the flouter of Southern morality he appeared to be (*GWTW*, 1035).<sup>31</sup> Though he still doubts his ability to internalize and conform to the honor code, he longs for a comforting, genteel way of life that he associates with the prewar period. The last readers hear of Rhett Butler, he leaves his future-minded spouse to search out his planter roots and a lost idyll. Mitchell hints at this outcome with Rhett's eleventh hour enlistment in the army, his courting of the Atlanta "Old Guard" to secure Bonnie's position in Atlanta society, and separate observations by Ashley and Melanie that Ashley and Rhett, who share a similar upbringing, are very much alike. Suddenly desirous of "old ways," (i.e. the antithesis of *Scarlett*), Rhett also declares himself unable to believe in "clean slates" and "starting over." In a conclusion that seems to affirm not only the incompatibility of Rhett and *Scarlett* but also *Scarlett*'s belief that "no one could go forward with a load of aching memories," Mitchell offers two irreconcilable perspectives on prior harm. To *Scarlett*, the past is painful because there lies what she has irretrievably lost; to relieve herself of that burden of memory, she need only not think on it. For Rhett, the past harbors irreparable cruelties that cannot be forgotten and prevent the couple from moving forward.

*Scarlett*'s practice of active disremembering and Rhett's insistence on the impossibility of reparation are especially noteworthy given the bondage metaphor Mitchell embeds in *Scarlett*'s romantic relationships. The language of metaphorical bondage that characterizes *Scarlett*'s initial experience of marriage and motherhood eventually carries over into the affective power struggle of the Butler marriage. As poet Patricia Storace aptly observes, Rhett and *Scarlett*'s relationship "has

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<sup>31</sup> Taylor, *Scarlett's Women*, 118-119.

inexplicably been taken for a love story, when it is almost entirely expressed through the imagery of slave and master.”<sup>32</sup> Literary scholar Elizabeth Young points to Scarlett’s declaration of “belonging” to Rhett and to his earlier use of an equestrian metaphor —“I’m riding you with a slack rein my pet, but don’t forget that I’m riding with curb and spurs just the same”— as examples of the novel’s “gothic representation of love as sadomasochism.”<sup>33</sup> This portrayal is most apparent after a drunken Rhett defies Scarlett’s mandate of a celibate marriage. The encounter has produced significant debate as to whether the scene should be read as a rape—Storace describes it as “sex used punitively, as punishment for Scarlett’s infidelity,”—or as Helen Taylor argues, as an instance of “mutually pleasurable rough sex.”<sup>34</sup> As evidence for this interpretation, Taylor points to Scarlett’s morning after meditations, including the realization that Rhett loved her. For Scarlett, this knowledge presents an opportunity to “hold the whip over his insolent black head” and to “make him jump through any hoops she cared to hold” (*GWTW*, 941). Whatever else Scarlett’s reflections convey, they suggest a power relation that exists nowhere else in *Gone With the Wind*. As Helen Taylor writes, “Far from being the thoughts of a victim of rape, or the tones of a woman at peace with the husband who has humiliated her, this is the language of the slave-owner who is coolly sure of—and gets a sadomasochistic charge from—his absolute power. Here, Scarlett is more clearly equated with the cruel male planter of Southern fiction than the passive frightened girl so prevalent in the ‘female gothic’ novel; a product of her class and race, who has used male tactics and adopted masculine traits, she has internalized a white upper-class male confidence.”<sup>35</sup> Scarlett’s conflation of love and mastery suggests a dynamic of domination and subjection that does not exist in the novel’s depiction of chattel slavery. In Mitchell’s rendering,

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<sup>32</sup> Patricia Storace, “Look Away Dixie Land,” *The New York Review of Books*, December 19, 1991, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1991/dec/19/look-away-dixie-land/>.

<sup>33</sup> Young, *Disarming the Nation*, 266.

<sup>34</sup> Storace, “Look Away Dixie Land”; Taylor, *Scarlett’s Women*, 130.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *Scarlett’s Women*, 135.

slavery is a benevolent institution between indulgent masters and loyal slaves. Thus, while Scarlett thinks of love and marriage in terms that figure each as a form of bondage, Mitchell imagines only mutual affection between African American slaves and the people who own them as property.

The mystification of slavery's brutality and exploitation fits a larger pattern of denial by Mitchell's slaveholders. In *GWTW*, Mitchell intermittently suggests a generational conflict among antebellum planters, whose elders disturb the younger generations' genteel concept of themselves and their collective past. At the Twelve Oaks barbecue, Mr. McRae, a veteran of both the Mexican and Seminole Wars, attempts to douse the local fire eaters with sobering recollections of his military service. When his account of hunger and abject discomfort turns to bodily ailments—measles, pneumonia, and worse, dysentery—his granddaughter is dispatched to silence the old man, whose cautions about the hazards of soldiering are considered too indecorous for the crowd at Twelve Oaks. McRae and Grandma Fontaine, who later shocks her family with an unveiled sexual reference and the novel's only allusion to biracial children, are considered "a reminder of a cruder era" that the younger generations prefer to forget (*GWTW*, 109). Likewise, the gentleman father who disinherits Rhett Butler, considers his son too much like Rhett's grandfather, who made the family fortune as a pirate. Gentleman Butler tried to transform his parent into a respectable "sea captain," but his efforts were undermined by the old buccaneer, who had a taste for rum and a propensity to brag about his exploits when he drank (*GWTW*, 681). Born of an earlier, coarser epoch, these elders reveal not-so-genteel origins that challenge the collective self-concept of Mitchell's planter-slaveowners. The accuracy of McRae's predictions is evident, however, in Scarlett's own war experience, the nadir of which finds the ravenous heroine retching in a slave garden. Later, when Grandma Fontaine suggests she and Scarlett share a similar mettle, Mitchell associates Scarlett and her sometimes visceral narrative with figures who collectively undermine the propriety and authority of the so-called "Old Guard." While she shows a planter class working to suppress its unseemly past, Mitchell becomes complicit in the cover-up with



a portrait of slavery that consists of benevolent masters and loyal slaves.

*Gone With the Wind* dismisses any suggestion of slaveholder brutality as a falsehood propagated by misinformed Yankees. With her small cast of black characters, Mitchell attempts to affirm Scarlett's demeaning characterization that "negroes were provoking sometimes and stupid and lazy, but there was loyalty in them that money couldn't buy, a feeling of oneness with their white folks" (*GWTW*, 472). While Mitchell acknowledges that some ex-bondspeople harbored animosity for their former masters, none of her characters imparts that sentiment. Mitchell blames the phenomenon on agents of the Freedmen's Bureau who—to her horror—inspire notions of equality among the newly free. Mitchell treats former slaves' resentment as one aspect of the supposed injustice white Georgians suffer at the hands of Northern conquerors and ex-bondspeople who have the audacity to assert their freedom.

In her belated re-evaluation of Ashley Wilkes, Scarlett might have realized that the "old ways" he embodies are as much of a fantasy as her desire for Ashley, but in *Gone With the Wind*, the de-romanticizing of Ashley Wilkes does not translate into a dismantling of the plantation idyll or its narrative of slavery. Though Scarlett's nostalgic transgression with Ashley casts the recollections of former slaveholders as painful memories that should not be indulged, Mitchell allows these recollections of the "old ways" to stand as an accurate representation of the slaveholding past. Contradictory as it may seem, *Gone With the Wind* demonstrates how an author and her heroine can reject the Lost Cause in practice, yet still uphold its fictions of slavery and its doctrine of white supremacy.

With the character known only as "Mammy," and the man addressed by fictive kinship as Uncle Peter, the novel suggests that the bondspeople "owned" their respective slaveholding families "body and soul" (*GWTW*, 22, 144). In this ideological reversal, Mitchell inverts the power dynamic that defined chattel ownership of enslaved human beings and writes of Gerald O'Hara's slaves taking

“shameless advantage of him,” as though they somehow exploited the master who amassed his wealth from their labor (*GWTW*, 51). After killing the rent agent of a British absentee landlord, Gerald immigrated to Georgia with aspirations of becoming a slaveowner and a landed gentleman (*GWTW*, 45). Attempting to ascend a class hierarchy not unlike the one he left in Ireland, Gerald’s “first step upward toward his heart’s desire” was the purchase of his first slave, Pork (*GWTW*, 45). The domestic slave trade, which notoriously dislocated bondspeople and destroyed their social networks, is represented in the novel with Gerald’s purchase of Pork’s wife, Dilcey, and her daughter, Prissy, ostensibly so the family can live in one household. Mitchell does not mention that the slave marriage had no legal standing. She offers no inkling of the power wielded by slaveholders or the degree to which bondspeople’s lives were governed by the whims of their masters. Without the slightest hint of authorial rebuke, Gerald thinks it a great practical joke to tell his valet that instead of buying Dilcey, he has sold Pork to John Wilkes (*GWTW*, 38). Unaccountably, Gerald sees hilarity, not cruelty, in this objectification. In Mitchell’s fictional world of benign slavery, however, such a transaction would hardly constitute the catastrophe that in reality dismantled the lives of enslaved men, women, and children. Gerald’s facetious scenario would unite the slave couple just the same. In fact, the only suggestion that a slaveowner might be anything but beneficent comes in the form of Scarlett’s slaps and her threat to sell Prissy downriver as a field hand. Rather than revealing violence as an inherent feature of slavery, the abuse becomes part of the novel’s elevation of Scarlett’s accomplishments. Because of Prissy’s—and later Rhett’s—fecklessness, Scarlett must singlehandedly deliver Melanie’s baby and evacuate the household unassisted.<sup>36</sup> Otherwise, the only hint of violence between masters and slaves, which the novel ultimately dispels, comes from postwar Northern émigrés who derive their knowledge of slavery from reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

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<sup>36</sup> As Helen Taylor aptly notes, readers are told that Prissy is the first slave Scarlett has ever struck. Taylor, *Scarlett’s Women*, 178.

The significance of Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel in nineteenth century culture was comparable to that of *Gone With the Wind* in the twentieth century, but in their representations of slavery the two novels could hardly disagree more. Mitchell's international readers recognized the disparity. According to Mitchell, the main criticism she received from her audience in England was that *Gone With the Wind* did not accord with Stowe's portrait of Southern slavery. Mitchell summarized this response as "'Margaret Mitchell's writing shows a difference in the affection between blacks and whites and their dependence on one another. Harriet Beecher Stowe's work and Margaret Mitchell's work disagree entirely.' They wonder which is correct."<sup>37</sup> To a reader in Berlin, Mitchell wrote, "It makes me very happy to know that 'Gone With the Wind' is helping refute the impression of the South which people abroad gained from Mrs. Stowe's book. Here in America 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' has been long forgotten and there are very few people today who have read it. They only know it as the name of a book which had a good deal to do with the bitterness of the abolition movement."<sup>38</sup> Sounding all too much like the heroine who simply prefers to block out the painful past, Mitchell approves of the collective forgetting of Stowe's version of slavery.

In *Gone With the Wind*, Mitchell undermines Stowe's novel by making it the sole reference on slavery for the Northern acquaintances who press Scarlett for true stories of bloodhounds pursuing runaway slaves. Scarlett's insistence that she has never even seen a bloodhound belies Stowe's account and positions *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a prurient fabrication of Yankee women. Indeed, Mitchell's version of slavery is so benign that neither she nor her characters can conceive of slaves attempting to escape their bondage. When the Union army takes Ashley Wilkes prisoner, the bondsman Mose, who accompanied the younger Wilkes to war, does not pursue his liberty but telegraphs Melanie to ask if he

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<sup>37</sup> Lamar Q. Ball, "Fame's Tempo has been Quickened, According to Margaret Mitchell," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 11, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Constitution.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell and Harwell, *Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind Letters*, 217.

should return to his master's household. Mose apparently does return to Twelve Oaks and his former bondage, only to follow John Wilkes to the army.

Through the voices of such loyal slave caricatures, *Gone With the Wind* ventriloquizes some of its harshest criticism for bondspeople who resist slavery and for freedpeople who assert their political rights. After returning to find her mother dead and Tara turned topsy-turvy, Scarlett pays a visit to her neighbors, where she learns all but four of the Fontaines' slaves have fled. Reportedly, they were "frightened by the approach of the Yankees" (GWTW, 446). Implying that most of the O'Hara slaves also ran from the Union army, Grandma Fontaine says that when they passed her house, they "came through here so scared they were popeyed" (GWTW, 447). Her account assumes that the slave population shares the planters' contempt for Union soldiers. The suggestion that the slaves flee in fear vilifies the Union army and obscures the historical reality that thousands of slaves considered the army a place of refuge from former masters. Pork tells a slightly different tale of his fellow bondspeople's departure from Tara. According to the loyal valet, at least some of Tara's slaves ran off with the Union army, not away from it, but the betrayal he suggests in their exodus obscures the motives of these self-liberators. As Pork tells Scarlett, "dem trashy niggers done runned away an' some of dem went off wid de Yankees" (GWTW, 407). The apparent provocation for Pork's use of racial epithet is the disloyalty that distinguishes the "trashy" defectors from the three trusty house servants—Pork, Dilcey, and Mammy—who remain. Mammy applies a similar racist invective but replaces "trashy" with the term "free issue," to express her disapproval of freedmen who disassociate from former masters. Together, Pork and Mammy affirm Mitchell's narrative of Reconstruction, which applauds former slaves who "scorned freedom" and "suffered as severely as their white masters" (GWTW, 654). Recalling the caste system that designated house slaves as a higher class than field hands, Mitchell explains that "the better class," of ex-slaves, meaning former house workers, typically remained with their former masters. By her account, some former field hands also "refused to avail themselves of the new freedom," a decision

of which she clearly approves. Reprising the earlier language of Pork and Mammy, however, Mitchell declares that it was the “hordes of ‘trashy free issue niggers,’ who were causing most of the trouble,” in other words, the ex-bondspeople who pursued their rights as free citizens. This group, Mitchell writes, consisted of the slaves “least willing or able to learn, the least energetic, the least honest and trustworthy, the most vicious and brutish” (*GWTW*, 654). With “Yankee” assistance, asserts Mitchell, this group of the “lowest and most ignorant” former slaves ascended to the top of the social order and made “life a misery for the South” (*GWTW*, 654). While chaperoning Scarlett in Atlanta, Mammy insists that she is now free and cannot be ordered back to Tara, but she asserts her freedom in an affirmation of her enslaved role as O’Hara guardian, whose duty is to keep Scarlett out of trouble (*GWTW*, 601). Ultimately, Mammy and Pork condemn the autonomy of former bondspeople and uphold the stereotype of the loyal, devoted slave. Through these characters, the novel both enacts and praises the ex-slaves’ forfeiture of freedom for continued allegiance to their former masters.

Mitchell’s Mammy exemplifies an enduring cultural myth of the slave who acts as a surrogate mother to the master’s children. The Mammy of Southern slaveholding legend is both “idealized woman” and “idealized slave.”<sup>39</sup> She is noble, self-sacrificing, and asexual. This mythical figure identifies more with her enslavers than her fellow bondspeople. She stands as a cultural emblem of romanticized affection between masters and slaves. Mitchell’s incarnation of Mammy, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders argues, manifests nearly all of the attributes of the Mammy myth to such an exaggerated degree that “Mammy is reduced to a comical caricature.” Moreover, Mitchell’s Mammy “is not just subservient to her master’s family, she has adopted their entire belief system, which insists on her inferiority.” Beyond her idealized role in the O’Hara household, Mammy has no kinship ties, or

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<sup>39</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 61.

at least none that the novel, told from Scarlett's perspective, will acknowledge.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, Dilcey is the biological mother to twelve-year-old Prissy and an infant whose birth enables Dilcey to breastfeed Beau Wilkes. In both instances, Dilcey's relation to the family of a current or former master supersedes her relation to her own children. Acting as maternal substitute to Beau, she nourishes the grandson of her former owner. Earlier in the novel, when Gerald purchases both Dilcey and Prissy from John Wilkes, Dilcey shows her gratitude by giving Prissy to Scarlett as a maid. Despite having no legal guardianship of Prissy, the mother reifies her daughter's property status by symbolically giving away her child to their new mistress.

After the war, when Dilcey emerges as Scarlett's only reliable help with the cotton harvest, Dilcey's loyalty to her former owner leads to her criticism and physical punishment of Prissy. While Melanie and Careen prove too infirm, Suellen refuses to perform the manual labor she continues to associate with the lowest strata of a racialized caste system. As Pork and Mammy, both former house slaves, also protest their degradation to field work, they toil so slowly and grumble so much that Scarlett finally relieves them of their cotton picking duties. Only Dilcey works "tirelessly, silently, like a machine." Prissy, meanwhile, picks "lazily, spasmodically," and constantly complains. In response, Dilcey whips Prissy with a cotton stalk until she screams. Afterward, the mother-turned-overseer apologizes to Scarlett for her "mighty wuthless" daughter (*GWTW*, 456). As Dilcey upholds the racist ideology of the slaveholding regime and acts out its violence on her daughter, Scarlett vows not to forget Dilcey's loyalty; Dilcey in turn assures Scarlett that she has not forgotten Gerald's good deed of buying Prissy. In a novel that prescribes forgetting as a means of survival, one thing the narrative deems worthy of remembrance is the reciprocal exchange of a master's benevolence and a slave's devotion.

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<sup>40</sup> Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 125.

During her wartime residence in Atlanta, Scarlett briefly advocates a counterhistory by which war might have been averted. It would have been better, she tells Rhett, if the Yankees had compensated slaveholders for their human chattel or even for slaveholders to have surrendered their slaves “free of charge” (*GWTW*, 261). This unexpected identification of slavery as the central cause of dispute is quickly dismissed by Rhett, who insists it is only an “excuse” and “there’ll always be wars because men love wars” (*GWTW*, 261). The transaction Scarlett proposes notably omits any suggestion of manumission but ponders “giving” the slaves to Northern adversaries, as though implying a transfer of ownership to new masters. In the Reconstruction years, when war is no longer an exigent threat and the freedom of former slaves has come to fruition, Scarlett laments, “The more I see of emancipation, the more criminal I think it is” (*GWTW*, 639). Scarlett renders this evaluation in a longer tirade on the difficulties of staffing her lumber mill. The wage system, according to Scarlett, has “ruined” free black workers, whom she replaces with prisoners she leases from the state. Scarlett’s opponents, including her husband Frank Kennedy, her former-convict bodyguard Archie, Mammy, Peter, Ashley Wilkes, and most of Atlanta, consider her willingness to profit from others’ misery immoral. The system, they argue, is too susceptible to abuses. Scarlett learns this first hand on a visit to Johnnie Gallegher’s mill. Though the mistreatment of the convicts troubles her, Scarlett does not fire Gallegher or allow him to quit because “He was making money for her” (*GWTW*, 786). As Scarlett reminds her critics of their recent slave ownership, the debate on the ethics of forced, uncompensated prisoner labor devolves into an endorsement of slavery. The obvious difference, Ashley avers, is that slaves were not miserable, “And besides,” he adds, “I’d have freed them all when Father died if the war hadn’t already freed them” (*GWTW*, 978). The embodiment of plantation nostalgia, Ashley echoes a strand of Lost Cause revisionism that insists the South would have abandoned slave labor even without the Civil War, though that claim is not supported elsewhere in the novel.<sup>41</sup> More generally, Scarlett encounters the

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<sup>41</sup> Alan T. Nolan, “The Anatomy of the Myth,” in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, eds. Gary W.

argument that slavery differed from convict labor in that “slaves were neither miserable nor unfortunate” and “negroes were far better off under slavery than they were now under freedom” (*GWTW*, 759). This flagrant endorsement of slavery constitutes one half of the novel’s thesis on Reconstruction, what Mitchell identifies as a “worse scourge” than the Civil War (*GWTW*, 521).

In *Gone With the Wind*, the adversity that Scarlett must overcome is slaveholders’ dispossession of human property and the political disempowerment that accompanies defeat. When Mitchell calls the early years of Reconstruction “three years of terrorism,” she does not refer to the extralegal violence carried out by the Ku Klux Klan or by Rhett Butler; the terrorist action Mitchell laments is the adversity suffered by ex-Confederates, specifically white planters, under Federal rule (*GWTW*, 841). When Scarlett returns to Atlanta with a plan to procure tax money for Tara, she finds Rhett jailed by Federal troops and accused of murder. He admits killing a black man for being “uppity to a lady,” but for all his infamy in Atlanta society, this murder does not damage his reputation in the least (*GWTW*, 623). If anything, the defeated Confederates admire Rhett’s conduct toward his jailers, and the murder functions as little more than a throwaway plot device. The Klan’s lynching of a black man is similarly cast as a defense of white womanhood. The vigilantes claim that the man was suspected of sexual assault and their intervention spares the alleged victim from testifying in open court. Without the slightest suggestion that the story might have been fabricated, Mitchell perpetuates the myth of the black male rapist repeated throughout the South as justification for lynching.

In the novel, issues of exploitation and commerce intersect with the assault of Scarlett as she drives through Shantytown en route from one of her lumber mills. On orders from his white companion, Scarlett’s black assailant rips her basque and gropes her upper body for the wad of cash he thinks is hidden in her undergarments. The incident, which leads to a reprisal from the Klan and the death of Frank Kennedy, provides yet another example of the ideological inversion Mitchell commits

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Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 16, 21.



throughout the novel. Just as she makes Peter and Mammy the body-and-soul proprietors of the families who legally own them, Mitchell inverts the economic motives for white supremacist violence and makes a black freedman both robber and ravager of Southern white womanhood.<sup>42</sup>

Mitchell also suggests predation by the Federal cavalryman Scarlett kills. Hearing the intruder enter the Tara kitchen, Scarlett thinks of the scanty dinner stewing over the fire. The prospect of losing that meal “brought painfully” from neighbors’ gardens drives her to a murderous rage: “They [the Federal Army] descended like locusts and left Tara to starve slowly, and now they were back again to steal the poor leavings. Her empty stomach writhed within her. By God this was one Yankee who would do no more stealing” (*GWTW*, 439). The villainy of the soldier she shoots to death is based on his supposed intent to deprive Scarlett of her meager food supply, as well as the fruits of her labor. The author redirects an inherent feature of slavery—the master’s human parasitism—as a further indictment of the Federal military presence in the South. Yet in an irony lost on both the author and her heroine, the vegetables Scarlett defends, probably scavenged from the slave garden at Twelve Oaks, are likely the stolen products of slave labor, which as a member of the prewar slaveholding class, Scarlett had no problem consuming.

*Gone With the Wind*, which Mitchell originally planned to title “Tote the Weary Load” repeatedly invokes the lyrics of the Stephen Foster song, “My Old Kentucky Home, Good-Night.”<sup>43</sup> Scarlett’s anthem of survival is actually co-opted from a ballad—albeit a problematic one—that speaks

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<sup>42</sup> Linda Williams aptly notes that the scene deviates from earlier portrayals of sexual assault. In Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* and D.W. Griffith’s film adaptation *Birth of a Nation*, the white Southern maiden chooses death over sexual violation by a black assailant. As Williams observes, Scarlett is “emphatically not the innocent virgin of the Dixon-Griffith tradition but a coolheaded calculating profiteer.... It is money Scarlett pursues when she flouts convention by riding alone in Atlanta’s most dubious neighborhoods to look after her lumber mills. And it is money the attackers seek in the novel, not her precious white womanhood”; Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 196.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 211.

to the hardship of slave life. Thought to have been inspired by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,<sup>44</sup> the song represents a plantation idyll similar to that of Ashley Wilkes's imagination, but one irreparably disrupted by the sale of bondspeople to the deadly sugar cane fields of the Deep South. The composition belongs to a genre of "carry-me-back" songs in which white audiences imagined that slaves felt an enduring affection for the masters, even those who betrayed their bondspeople by selling them away. According to historian Steven Deyle, these songs "exposed the delusional capacities of the slaveholders' paternalistic ideal," as the "carry me backs...supposedly reaffirmed the belief that their people still loved them."<sup>45</sup> The meaning that white slaveholders derived from the songs is consistent with the paternalistic view of slavery in *Gone With the Wind*, though Mitchell seems disinclined to entertain the possibility that John Wilkes or Gerald O'Hara would ever sell their bondspeople any farther than the next plantation. In her evocation of "My Old Kentucky Home Good-Night," Mitchell most often alludes to the line, "A few more days for to tote the weary load, No matter, 'twill never be light." As an expression of Scarlett's burdens, Mitchell's use of the song obscures the ordeal of the slave. The weary load that Scarlett bears is the persecution of former planters by contemptible "Yankees," free blacks, and white parvenus. Particularly nefarious are the Freedmen's Bureau agents Wilkerson and Hilton, both of whom formerly held the occupation of "Yankee overseer."

In the antebellum South, slave overseers constituted a class considered unfit for the society of their employers. Early in the novel, Ellen O'Hara demands the dismissal of Tara's overseer, Jonas Wilkerson, for his refusal to marry the mother of his child, Emmie Slattery, whom Scarlett later blames for Ellen's death. In Mitchell's explication of planter social conventions, overseers like Wilkerson are "forever barred...from any contact with County social life." Consequently, "There was no family of

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<sup>44</sup> Ken Emerson, *Dooh-Dah: Stephen Foster And The Rise Of American Popular Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 193-194.

<sup>45</sup> Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University, 2005), 243-244.

any standing into which he could marry, no people with whom he could associate except the Slatterys and riffraff like them.” As Wilkerson is “several cuts above the Slatterys in education,” according to Mitchell, “it [is] only natural that he should not want to marry Emmie, no matter how often he might walk with her in the twilight” (*GWTW*, 65). After the war, Jonas Wilkerson and Emmie Slattery reemerge married, moneyed, and, if not respectable, at least empowered by Wilkerson’s new job as director of the local Freedmen’s Bureau. In this character, Mitchell merges a vengeful plot to appropriate Tara with the federal agency that assists former slaves’ transition from slavery to freedom.

According to Mitchell’s version of Reconstruction, the Freedmen’s Bureau lured ex-slaves into the city, “fed them while they loafed and poisoned their minds against their former owners” (*GWTW*, 521). Mitchell conveys a combination of shock and contempt when she accuses Wilkerson and Hilton of fostering notions of equality among the freedpeople. The Bureau agents “told the negroes they were as good as the whites in every way and soon white and negro marriages would be permitted,” advice Mitchell seems to think outrageous. By her account, the Freedmen’s Bureau also fosters false expectations that planters’ estates will be parceled out and each former slave allotted forty acres and a mule. Consistent with its earlier, romanticized portrayal of benevolent slavery, *Gone With the Wind* blames the Freedmen’s Bureau, embodied in Wilkerson and Hilton, for exciting ex-bondspeople’s sudden animosity toward their former masters. “They kept the negroes stirred up with talks of cruelty perpetrated by the whites,” declares Mitchell, “and, in a section long famed for the affectionate relations between slaves and slave owners, hate and suspicion began to grow” (*GWTW*, 522). Mitchell’s account of Reconstruction conflates the suffering of ex-Confederates with the exercise of civil rights by African Americans and what *GWTW* clearly considers an unjustified resentment toward their former enslavers. Mitchell also suggests the election of black and poor white legislators as another form of planter persecution. When Mitchell writes of illiterate black officeholders who “spent most of their time eating goobers and easing their unaccustomed feet into and out of new shoes,” Mitchell

could have been describing the legislative scenes from D.W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* (GWTW, 904). Writing of their votes in favor of taxes that ultimately supported graft, Mitchell suggests corruption in the Reconstruction governments and hints at yet another political cause for the Tara tax crisis. Ultimately, Mitchell premises her popular story of Scarlett's resilience on the notion of white Southern victimhood and the perceived threat black freedom and citizenship pose to white supremacy.

Mitchell locates a similar narrative in Grandma Fontaine's memories of Native American resistance to U.S. expansion. In her account of Gerald's self-making, Mitchell reveals Tara is built on land "ceded by the Indians," as though it were gifted, not confiscated in a forced relocation of the original occupants. U.S. acquisition of ancestral Indian homelands is, by Mitchell's account, a bloody affair, but she represents this violence solely through Grandma Fontaine's childhood recollection of the so-called "Creek uprising," when Fontaine witnessed the murder and mutilation of her mother and siblings (GWTW, 452). Grandma Fontaine tells her story to communicate empathy for Scarlett's recent hardships, though talk of this distant era only irritates Scarlett, who has vowed not to think on the past. Yet as Grandma Fontaine suggests a common experience of adversity for the two women, Mitchell, to her lasting discredit, extends her erroneous narrative of white victimhood to a past that predates the Civil War by fifty years. She frames Jonas Wilkerson's efforts to evict the O'Haras as one of the great travesties of the novel but remains oblivious to the land appropriation that made the Georgia property available for white planters to settle.

Meanwhile, the only contribution to the Civil War that Mitchell attributes to African Americans is their forced menial labor for a government that exists to ensure their perpetual enslavement. Though Mitchell ignores black military service to the Union, Scarlett encounters a group of slaves impressed to the Confederate army as ditch diggers; their mission: shovel out rifle entrenchments for the fortification of Atlanta. Among the workers, Scarlett finds Sam, the erstwhile foreman of Tara, leading the slaves in singing "Go Down, Moses." Mitchell does not expound on the political significance of the

spiritual, which evokes the Biblical Exodus as an allegory for African American enslavement, but Sam's reappearance later in the novel negates the yearning for freedom he expresses in the singing of the hymn.

Sam reemerges nearly five hundred pages later, just in time to aid Scarlett against the Shantytown assault. Prior to his intervention, he relates what happened to him after he saw Scarlett in Atlanta. Shortly after their last meeting, the soldier in charge of digging the breastworks was killed. Sam's first inclination was to return to Tara, but having no pass, he feared being taken up by a patrol. In short order, he found himself working as the valet of a Union colonel. Sam says the promotion made him feel "biggity" but then hastens to note the ignorance of Northerners who do not know the difference between a body servant and a field hand. The colonel paid good wages, and after the war, he persuaded Sam to accompany him north to Washington, New York, and eventually to the colonel's home in Boston. Sam recalls discomfort at being addressed formally as "Mr. O'Hara" and at being invited to sit in the company of whites. Reinforcing the racial segregation of the 1930s, Sam declares that he never sat with white folks and was not about to start. Despite the cordial treatment, Sam claims to have sensed that in their hearts, these people did not like him. They encouraged him to tell stories of being beaten and chased by bloodhounds, and though his employers apparently did not believe his praise of the O'Haras, his pleasant recollections in their defense made Sam long to return to his former master and mistress. He tells Scarlett, "Ah done had nuff freedom. Ah wants somebody ter feed me good vittles reg'lar, and tell me whut ter do an' whut not ter do, an' look after me w'en Ah gits sick" (*GWTW*, 781). Among the freedpeople of the novel, Sam is the only character to live removed from his former masters, but having obtained the freedom he exalted in song, he experiences a sort of buyer's remorse. By his account, emancipation, employment, and travel merely happen to Sam without much volition on his part, but he quite deliberately resolves to trade in his freedom for the paternalism he claims to have experienced in bondage. As elsewhere in the novel, Mitchell ventriloquizes her

endorsement of slavery through former slaves who act as the novel's strongest proponents of human bondage.

In October 1936, *The Washington Post* published a letter to the editor signed by "A Yankee" that criticized both *Gone With the Wind* and the newspaper's favorable review of it. The letter charged that Mitchell had "endeavor[ed] to rekindle the flame of hatred and strife and renew again the bitterness that prevailed in our own land following the close of the Civil War." *Gone With the Wind* would dash any hope for amicable sectional relations, "A Yankee" insisted, because the novel "reeks with hatred, rancor, sectional strife, vulgarity, sensuality, contradiction and malice."<sup>46</sup> The letter prompted several more in Mitchell's defense. Gordon L. Groover, a native Georgian residing Maryland, insisted that he harbored "no malice toward any Northerner" but asserted that "individuals such as 'A Yankee' do more harm toward the good will between the North and South than all the sectional literature ever written."<sup>47</sup> Groover implored readers to give due credit "when a Southern writer turns out an excellent novel," as he apparently thought Mitchell had. He closed his letter with an affirmation that "we are all one now."<sup>48</sup> Another writer identified only as Luria denied any divisive intent on Mitchell's part and suggested "A Yankee" might be "squeamish" about the novel because the war records offer little in which the "Northern people could take justifiable pride."<sup>49</sup> Still another thought the source of ire for "A Yankee" was "that reality hurts and sometimes hurts so badly that the reaction has to be announced publicly."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> A Yankee, letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, October 26, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>47</sup> Gordon L. Groover, letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, October 29, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Luria, letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, November 1, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>50</sup> H. Doyle Wert, letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, November 1, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

When the denouncement by “Southern Woman” calling Scarlett a “bad woman” appeared in the *Post*, it, too, prompted an outpouring of support for *Gone With the Wind*. Fans responded to criticisms of Mitchell’s novel with praise for what they deemed its historical truth. While defending the novel against “Southern Woman,” Arthur Shepard, of Washington, assessed *Gone With the Wind* as “perhaps the greatest book yet produced in America,” and praised it as “very good history.”<sup>51</sup> As proof of the novel’s “essential fidelity to the military and civil history of the period” Shepard cited its conformity to two contemporary examinations of the Civil War and Reconstruction—Liddell Hart’s *Sherman*, which emphasized the general’s strategy of targeting the civilian population<sup>52</sup> and Claude Bowers’s *The Tragic Era*, which W.E.B. DuBois considered “absolutely devoid of historical judgment or sociological knowledge” and “a classic example of historical propaganda of the cheaper sort.”<sup>53</sup>

To affirm Mitchell’s account of war and slavery, some of the letter writers recounted their families’ experiences. Minnie Hammant of Warrenton, Virginia, wrote of her grandfather, who walked 125 miles home from prison, and his wife, who had “never cooked a meal in her life.” Avoiding the word slave, Hammant wrote that with the aid of “a few servants who would not take their freedom,” her grandparents and their former bondspeople “all pulled together and fought the battles of poverty and democracy.”<sup>54</sup> Rev. Thomas Opie, whose father and grandfather owned one hundred slaves in Selma, Virginia, wrote that he considered slavery wrong wherever it occurred, then proceeded to tell of his uncle’s failed efforts at hiding the family’s stock and furniture from the Federal army. Opie was amused that a case holding fifty steel razors was among the items confiscated by Union soldiers. “What

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<sup>51</sup> Arthur M. Shepard, letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, November 27, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>52</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 98.

<sup>53</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935; repr., New York: Free Press, 1998), 721.

<sup>54</sup> Minnie Hammant, letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, November 7, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

implements of battle those razors might have been,” he speculated, “had they been placed in the hands of the loyal slaves in defense of ‘Ole Missus’ and ‘de wimmen folks!’”<sup>55</sup> This imagined scenario suggests the extremes of loyalty Opie expected bondspeople would have demonstrated in his family’s defense. Hammant’s and Opie’s letters convey a general acceptance of *Gone With the Wind* as an accurate account of race relations during and after the war.

In some respects, Margaret Mitchell was fastidious in her research. She estimated that if she ever compiled a bibliography of the sources she had consulted, the entries would number in the thousands.<sup>56</sup> Once MacMillan bought the manuscript, Mitchell spent eight months fact checking her narrative.<sup>57</sup> When a critic accused her of putting the term “sissy” into common use a whole generation too early, she insisted that she had introduced the parlance only after finding it in the letter of a Civil War soldier. From such letters, she also discovered that, contrary to popular belief, Confederate soldiers’ motives for fighting the war had not been uniform.<sup>58</sup> Her insistence on historical accuracy was perhaps most apparent in her representation of the architecture of Atlanta and surrounding counties. After a crew from David O. Selznick’s production company visited Mitchell in Atlanta, she wrote, “I had tried to prepare them by reiterating that this section of North Georgia was new and crude compared with other sections of the South, and white columns were the exception rather than the rule. I besought them to please leave Tara ugly, sprawling, columnless, and they agreed.”<sup>59</sup>

On the politics of Reconstruction, however, Mitchell was far less diligent. Regarding her

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<sup>55</sup> (Rev.) Thomas F. Opie, letter to the editor, *Washington Post*, December 14, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>56</sup> Lamar Q. Ball, “Writing of ‘Gone with the Wind’ Beset by Difficulties, Says Author,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 9, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Constitution.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* Mitchell also wrote to Douglass Southall Freeman that her eyes were already strained from fact checking when she nearly ruined her sight proofreading as much as twenty hours a day; Mitchell and Harwell, *Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind Letters*, 77.

<sup>58</sup> Mitchell and Harwell, *Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind Letters*, 160.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.



depiction of the Ku Klux Klan, Mitchell wrote, “As I had not written anything about the Klan which is not common knowledge to every Southerner, I had done no research upon it.”<sup>60</sup> The same author who claimed that she nearly ruined her vision verifying details like the period use of slang simply took for granted her culture’s aggrandizement of the infamous racial terrorist organization. After all, when Thomas Dixon, one of the authors most responsible for this evangelism, wrote in praise of *Gone With the Wind*, Mitchell responded that she was “practically raised” on Dixon’s novels and “loved them very much.” Mitchell also recalled how, at age eleven, she had dramatized *The Traitor*, the third novel in Dixon’s Ku Klux Klan trilogy. Reminiscent of Beau Wilkes and Wade Hamilton’s reenactment of Gettysburg, Mitchell recruited several neighborhood children to play the clansmen in her production.<sup>61</sup> The dramatization evinced both the popularity of Dixon’s novels and the children’s indoctrination with his white supremacist ideology, which young Mitchell, as producer, helped perpetuate.

Much like the readers who debated the Civil War and *Gone With the Wind* in *The Washington Post*, reviewers, whether reserved or lavish in their praise, almost universally accepted its historical interpretations. Ralph Thompson of *The New York Times* thought the novel would have been “infinitely better” if Mitchell had distilled it into five hundred pages but referred without irony to the antebellum slavery regime as a “beautiful civilization.” He noted the similar perspective of Claude Bower’s *The Tragic Era*, and identified the “historical background” as the “chief virtue” of Mitchell’s novel.<sup>62</sup> When J. Donald Adams reviewed the novel for *The New York Times*, he concluded that stylistically, it was not a great novel, but he found Mitchell’s storytelling so vivid and engaging, he judged *Gone with the*

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>62</sup> Ralph Thompson, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

*Wind* “the best Civil War novel that has yet been written.”<sup>63</sup> Of particular note, according to Adams, was Mitchell’s handling of the “brutal and crushing force of Reconstruction.”<sup>64</sup> Julia Peterkin, of *The Washington Post*, judged *Gone With the Wind* “the best novel that has ever come out of the South” and believed it was “unsurpassed in the whole of American writing.” On Mitchell’s interpretation of the past, Peterkin boasted, “She knows the South and its history as well as she knows the red hills of Georgia.”<sup>65</sup> Paul Jordan-Smith, of the *Los Angeles Times*, called the *Gone With the Wind* “the most powerful presentation of what took place during Reconstruction that has ever been written.”<sup>66</sup> Even Eleanor Roosevelt validated the novel’s perspective. In her syndicated column “My Day,” Roosevelt wrote that *Gone With the Wind* had illuminated why “women of the South” held to a prolonged bitterness toward “northern invaders,” which the First Lady judged “only natural.” Mitchell’s novel, she supposed, “should help to make [their attitude] vividly clear even to those who haven’t understood it before.”<sup>67</sup>

A reviewer for *The Nation* was even more accommodating to Mitchell’s point of view. Margaret Mitchell “writes with the bias of passionate, regionalism,” Evelyn Scott reasoned, “but the verifiable happenings described eloquently justify prejudice.”<sup>68</sup> In a letter to the editor, English professor and literary critic F.W. Dupee, who later became a regular contributor to *The Nation*, took Scott and the publication to task for a review he considered too lenient. He judged Mitchell’s “literary

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<sup>63</sup> J. Donald Adams, “A Fine Novel of the Civil War,” *New York Times*, July 5, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Julia Peterkin., “The Old South Lives Again,” *Washington Post*, July 12, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Jordan-Smith, “New Books,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

<sup>67</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” August 22, 1936, My Day Project, The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, George Washington University, [http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?\\_y=1936&\\_f=md054416](http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1936&_f=md054416).

<sup>68</sup> Evelyn Scott, “War Between the States,” *Nation*, July 4, 1936, 19, EBSCO Nation Archives.

performance” to be “far below” the publication’s standards but took particular exception to the novel’s depiction of Reconstruction: “To justify such a piece of roaring Ku Klux Klanism, historically untrue and insulting to the Negroes, an artistic miracle would be necessary. And artistic miracles do not occur in connection with such unholy ideologies.”<sup>69</sup> Dupee knew his assessment of *Gone With the Wind*, especially its depiction of African Americans, did not represent a majority opinion. As the novel was already a bestseller, he conceded, there was probably no stopping it from becoming a “national calamity,” but Dupee urged that *The Nation* should at least “make an effort against it.”<sup>70</sup>

In its July 1937 issue, the *Journal of Negro History* did just that. Assistant editor and history professor L.D. Reddick reviewed Mitchell’s novel alongside William Sumner Jenkins’s *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South*, which had been published in 1935 by an academic press. By the time of Reddick’s review, enthusiasm for Mitchell’s historical interpretation had spread to the scholarly journal *William and Mary Quarterly*, which praised Mitchell for her “truthful picture of the South as it was during the single decade covered by the novel.”<sup>71</sup> Reddick’s review was a two-pronged assault. Noting a comparable “degree of authenticity,” or lack of it, in *GWTW* and *Pro-Slavery Thought*, Reddick impugned the rampant bias he found among historians and in Mitchell’s novel, which he predicted would “have an unusual influence in shaping, re-shaping and emphasizing” the popular understanding of slavery and the Civil War. People who read only Mitchell’s novel, Reddick worried, would take it as a “true account” of that period. People who read it against the 1930s’ most popular histories of slavery, Civil War, and Reconstruction, he rightly feared, would see the concordance between the texts and misinterpret that as proof of the novel’s accuracy. Though he acknowledged it was an engaging story, *Gone With the Wind*, Reddick warned, was “written with a passionate sectional and racial bias” and

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<sup>69</sup> F. W. Dupee, letter to the editor, *Nation*, August 29, 1936, 255, EBSCO Nation Archives.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> G. Glenwood Clark, review of *Gone With the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (January 1937): 131, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1923008>.

was “almost painfully weak in the handling of the larger social forces.” Yes, the popular histories corroborated Mitchell’s account, but all that evinced was “that these ‘histories’ have issued from the same sectional and racial chauvinism.”<sup>72</sup> *Gone With the Wind*, like the most prominent academic texts, narrated history solely from the perspective of white Southerners. The novel whitewashed two hundred years of human exploitation and deceitfully transformed slaveholders into the martyred victims of the Civil War and emancipation.

### **W.E.B. DuBois and “The Propaganda of History”**

In 1935, a year prior to the publication of Mitchell’s novel, W.E.B. DuBois took his fellow historians to task for perpetuating what he called “the propaganda of history.”<sup>73</sup> If Mitchell’s account accorded with other prominent histories, it was because they, too, expressed a common sympathy for the South and its dispossessed slaveholders. As these authors rarely considered the role or perspective of African Americans, DuBois concluded, “The whole history of Reconstruction has with few exceptions been written by passionate believers in the inferiority of the Negro” (*BR*, 381). This was a systematic failure on the part of white historians but particularly Southern-born authors who had been forged in the same culture as Mitchell. Concentrating on the “efforts and experiences” of African Americans, *Black Reconstruction in America* offered a vastly different account of that period. As an indication of how racist ideologies proliferated in and outside of academia, DuBois prefaced his work with a disclaimer: “I am going to tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience” (*BR*, vii).

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<sup>72</sup> L. D. Reddick, review of *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South*, by William Sumner Jenkins, and *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell, *The Journal of Negro History* 22, no. 3 (July 1937): 366, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2714521>.

<sup>73</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 746. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *BR*.

Part labor history, sociological study, and indictment of the historical profession, DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* regards the post-Civil War period as the era in which the United States briefly extended the mantle of citizenship to African Americans before the country reverted to a racial caste system that resembled slavery in form, if not in law. The bulk of the work focuses on the Reconstruction period to 1880 but includes a history of slavery and the Civil War, which DuBois frames as a single coherent story of African Americans' relationship to U.S. democracy. The study also struck at the institutionalized racism of the 1930s by highlighting the process of its construction, exploding the cultural myths that sanctioned it, and implicating professional historians for their part in "one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings" (*BR*, 727).

In his first chapter, "The Black Worker," DuBois casts slavery as an aberration that "plagued a nation which asserted the equality of all men, and sought to derive powers of government from the consent of the governed" (*BR*, 3). While the framers of the Constitution "sought by every evasion, and almost by subterfuge to keep recognition of slavery out of the basic form of the new government," they incorrectly counted on a withdrawal from the international slave trade to rid the country of slavery (*BR*, 4). In the West Indies, where masters killed their slaves by overwork, the institution was sustained by a steady and comparatively cheap supply of laborers. Without the ability to replace slavery's casualties, the framers reasoned, the system of labor would perish from its own high mortality rates. But once the United States outlawed the international slave trade within its borders in 1808, DuBois writes, "it paid to conserve the slave and let him multiply" (*BR*, 4). As natural increase sustained the nation's slave population, technological innovations and the related cotton boom made black labor "the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure" but of a global economy that included Northern industry and the English factory system (*BR*, 5). By 1860, the South had invested most of its capital in slaves, and slavery had become the source of the planter's political power (*BR*, 39, 41). These economic and political interests, writes DuBois, motivated the South's "espousal of the doctrine of

Negro inferiority” (*BR*, 39).

While his language genders slaves as universally male—a practice that would continue for almost fifty years—DuBois emphasizes the economic motives for slavery that were masked by the fiction of paternalism. DuBois writes of an interstate slave trade that in early days, like the international trade in the West Indies, allowed producers in the Cotton Kingdom and sugar growers in the deep South to replace slaves who died of overwork. This discussion, together with the comparison of West Indian and U.S. slavery, reveals how masters and traders commodified people, how the market price of human beings fluctuated according to laws of supply and demand, and how those economic forces determined whether human life was expendable or costly enough for masters to refrain from literally working their slaves to death. In considering, “What did it mean to be a slave?” DuBois highlights commonalities with the modern exploited worker—oppression, deprivation, psychological debasement, a sense of powerlessness. Yet slavery, which constituted the “ultimate degradation of man,” was beyond modern comprehension: “No matter how degraded the factory hand [of the 1930s] he is not real estate. The tragedy of the black slave’s position was precisely this; his absolute subjection to the individual will of an owner...” (*BR* 8-10). Novels like *Gone With the Wind* and pseudo-histories that recycled pro-slavery ideology romanticized a mutual, almost familial affection between master and slave. In lieu of slaveholder mythology, DuBois cites the antebellum slave codes, which reveal the legal and civil status of the slave as “purely and absolutely property” (*BR*, 10). Of this fact, DuBois charges, “the white South was properly ashamed...and continually belittled and almost denied it” (*BR*, 11). Yet advertisements for slave sales and rewards for the return of runaways filled the pages of antebellum Southern newspapers. These documents underscored masters’ presumption of property rights in human beings, despite their argument that their bondspersons merely belonged to masters’ extended family. Though slavery’s apologists evoked this term figuratively, the reality posed by the sexual exploitation of enslaved women was that masters often bore a biological paternity to the people

they held in bondage. Under the category of “sexual chaos,” DuBois writes of the “concubinage of black women to white men,” slaveholders attempts to choose their bondspeople’s sexual partners, and the practice of masters “selling and bequeathing their own children” as property (*BR*, 35).

Quoting Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens, DuBois lays bare the motives of white Southerners who went to war to preserve slavery, what Stephens baldly declared the “proper status of the Negro in our form of civilization.” In Stephens view, the U.S. founders erred in their popular conviction that “the enslavement of the African was against the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally and politically.” This, Stephens attributed to an “assumption of the equality of races,” an ideology he declared “fundamentally wrong” (*BR*, 49, 50). Stephens’s declarations, which DuBois quotes at length, are a frank admission that slavery and racial inequality were cornerstones of the Confederacy and that the Confederacy was “founded on exactly the opposite idea” as the United States (*BR*, 50).

In DuBois’s account of the Civil War, slavery was unequivocally the cause, and slaves were the most important agents in determining the outcome. In what he characterizes as a “general strike against slavery,” DuBois recounts how slaves fled en masse to Union lines and offered their labor to the Federal army. That “withdrawal and bestowal of labor,” he concludes, “decided the war” (*BR*, 57). On African American military service, DuBois argues that the war record of black soldiers made possible emancipation and African American citizenship, but he also notes with considerable irony that the nation’s requirement for “proof of manhood” was a “willingness to take human life” (*BR*, 104).

Related from the perspective of defeated ex-slaveholders, *Gone With the Wind* and other narratives of its ilk treat emancipation as if the liberation of black bondspeople constituted a grave injury to white Southerners; writing of emancipation and its meaning to former slaves, DuBois tells of a “joy in the South” that other narratives omit. Assuming the monumental task of relating ex-slaves’ collective experience of emancipation, DuBois abandons the expository prose of the historian for a

more poetic account. His recurring theme is freedom as spiritual transcendence. At various points, emancipation is the “magnificent trumpet tones of Hebrew Scripture” transformed into a “strange new gospel”; it is “Beauty,” “Love,” and “Truth” sung “with the stars”; it is joy rising like “perfume—like a prayer”; and “a great song.” By contrast, opposition or indifference to black freedom is associated with degradation, which DuBois renders in the mixed metaphors of rape, defilement, and a song misunderstood by whites who “listened without ears.” Yet for DuBois, the divinity of the jubilant freedom song is undeniable: “it sits today at the right hand of God, as America’s one real gift to beauty; as slavery’s one redemption, distilled from the dross of its dung” (*BR*, 125). Refuting the popular narratives of the 1930s that cast slavery as a benign institution, DuBois renders slavery as absolute abjection. Emancipation, “slavery’s one redemption,” represents the deliverance of African Americans from bondage and the country from its national sin, but it stands as a singular instance, after which, DuBois argues, the United States failed to follow through on Reconstruction and reverted to a racial caste system that closely resembled slavery.

Quoting Carl Schurz, who toured the South shortly after the war, DuBois adopts Schurz’s conclusion that “whites esteem the blacks their property by natural right” and “still have an ingrained feeling that the blacks at large belong to the whites at large” (*BR*, 136). Refuting fictional accounts of slaves who remained loyal to their former masters after emancipation, DuBois cites a planter named Parker who reported that he called his former slaves together, told them of their freedom and offered equitable terms for their employment. Parker claimed all “consented willingly” and actually “preferred to stay with him,” but the freedmen told a different tale of coercion by violence. When one former slave declined the offer, Parker’s son “cuffed and kicked” the man so that no one else dared to leave. Afterward, the former bondspeople were constantly surveilled; one man was chained at night, and though legally emancipated, the people remained with Parker out of fear for their own safety. In *Black Reconstruction*, white southerners regularly resort to violence to oppose federal intervention in the



labor system, freedmen's education, and black suffrage.

DuBois examines not only Reconstruction but also the relation of that history to racist ideologies of the 1930s. He is particularly concerned with the disfranchisement of African Americans. Early on, he emphasizes that free blacks initially held the right to vote in all but three colonies but were eventually disfranchised in the Southern and Border states. Freeman who exercised the rights of citizenship were perceived as a threat to slavery. At the moment of emancipation, DuBois writes, "the right of all free Americans to be voters was unquestioned" (*BR*, 191). Disfranchisement of African Americans, which prevailed in the 1930s, according to DuBois, would have been unthinkable in the years after the Civil War, when the "majority of thinking Americans in the North believed the equal manhood of black folk" (*BR*, 320).

As he reinterprets the history of slavery, Civil War, and Reconstruction, DuBois also explains how white Americans came to embrace the historical account represented by *Gone With the Wind*; in doing so, he anticipates cultural memory studies on the subject by more than sixty years. After the Civil War, DuBois argues, Northern and Southern whites redirected the sectional antipathy they had for each other. They blamed African Americans both for causing the war and for its resulting hardships (*BR*, 125, 186). In order to heal the "terrible wounds" the war inflicted, Americans considered it unwise and unpatriotic to speak of the war's causes and consequences. As these subjects became taboo, Americans "minimized the slavery controversy which convulsed the nation" and "passed by Reconstruction with a phrase of regret or disgust" (*BR*, 713-714). As a result, argues DuBois, "Our histories tend to discuss American slavery so impartially, that in the end nobody seems to have done wrong and everybody was right. Slavery appears to have been thrust upon unwilling helpless America while the South was blameless in becoming its center" (*BR*, 714). As for the common view of Reconstruction, he writes, "There is scarce a child in the street that cannot tell you that the whole effort was a hideous mistake and an unfortunate incident, based on ignorance, revenge and the

perverse determination to attempt the impossible; that the history of the United States from 1866 to 1876 is something of which the nation ought to be ashamed and which did more to retard and set back the American Negro than anything that has happened to him; while at the same time it grievously and wantonly wounded again a part of the nation already hurt to death” (*BR*, 717).

In 1935, the same year Nazi Germany passed the Nuremberg laws as a prelude to genocide, DuBois charged that the popular histories of slavery had provided the “foundation for our present lawlessness and loss of democratic ideals.” They had “led the world to embrace and worship the color bar as a social salvation” and were “helping to range mankind in ranks of mutual hatred and contempt, at the summons of a cheap and false myth.” History would never exist as a science, DuBois insisted, until U.S. colleges were filled with scholars who regarded “truth as more important than defense of the white race” (*BR*, 725).

### **“Why God Let Us Lose the War”: Slavery in the Works of William Faulkner**

While *Gone With the Wind* portrays emancipation and the loss of white political supremacy as an adversity for ex-slaveholders, the trauma of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* is found in the existence of that caste system and in the refusal of Southern whites to acknowledge multiracial children whose very existence Mitchell’s characters consider unspeakable. Faulkner’s novel was published October 26, 1936, just shy of four months after *Gone With the Wind*.<sup>74</sup> The initial reviews were less than complimentary. In *The New Yorker*, Clifton Fadiman claimed not to comprehend why *Absalom, Absalom!* was written and pronounced it “the most consistently boring novel by a reputable writer to come my way during the last decade.”<sup>75</sup> Wallace Stegner of the *Salt Lake Tribune* criticized Fadiman’s

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<sup>74</sup> Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1974), 947.

assessment, as “not only impercipient and lazy, but silly as well,” and predicted that the novel’s technique “may prove to be a significant contribution to the theory and art of fiction.”<sup>76</sup> Yet even Malcolm Cowley, who would be instrumental in elevating Faulkner’s literary reputation, initially judged the novel a partial failure due to a “strained, involved, ecstatic style.”<sup>77</sup> In 1936, *Absalom, Absalom!* went through three printings totaling 9,900 copies. After Random House sold its last copy in February 1940, the novel went out of print.<sup>78</sup> By Malcolm Cowley’s account, all of Faulkner’s books—with the possible exception of *Sanctuary*—were out of print by 1945, when Cowley began editing *The Portable Faulkner*.<sup>79</sup> The volume contained excerpts of Faulkner’s works set in Yoknapatawpha County arranged chronologically according to the period of history they covered. Cowley wanted to emphasize “the scope and force and interdependence of [Faulkner’s] work as a whole,” and thus highlight the “epic quality” of his oeuvre, which other critics had failed to recognize.<sup>80</sup> Faulkner, whose work until then had enjoyed more popularity in Europe than in the United States,<sup>81</sup> was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950.<sup>82</sup> In the critical reevaluation that followed in the 1950s and 1960s,

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<sup>75</sup> Clifton Fadiman, “Faulkner, Extra-Special, Double-Distilled,” in *William Faulkner: Critical Assessments*, vol. 3, ed. Henry Claridge (Robertsbridge, East Sussex: Helm Information, Ltd., 1999), 261.

<sup>76</sup> Wallace Stegner, review of *Absalom, Absalom!* in Claridge, *Faulkner: Critical Assessments*, 274, 276.

<sup>77</sup> Malcolm Cowley, “Poe in Mississippi,” in *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Sutpen Family*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), 116.

<sup>78</sup> Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, introduction to *William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!: A Critical Casebook*, ed. Elisabeth Muhlenfeld (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984), xxxiii, xxxiv.

<sup>79</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944-1962* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 5-6, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Malcolm Cowley, introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*, rev. ed. (1946; repr., New York: Viking Press, 1975), vii.

<sup>81</sup> Arthur F. Kinney, introduction to Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner*, 39-40.

<sup>82</sup> Faulkner was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize, but during the selection process of 1949, no author was found to have met the criteria for the award as outlined in the will of Alfred Nobel; the rules allowed for the prize to be delayed until the following year. Faulkner was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize in 1950 for “his powerful and artistically unique contribution to the modern American novel.” “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1949,” *Nobelprize.org*, Nobel Media AB 2013, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/).

critics and scholars came to share the estimation of Cleanth Brooks, who judged *Absalom, Absalom!* “the greatest of Faulkner’s novels.”<sup>83</sup>

*Absalom, Absalom!* begins on a September afternoon in 1909, when Rosa Coldfield—Jefferson, Mississippi’s “poetess laureate” of the Lost Cause—relates to Quentin Compson the story of familial destruction wrought by her brother-in-law and former fiancé, Thomas Sutpen.<sup>84</sup> Sutpen’s attempts to establish a dynasty and acquire the trappings of wealth and respectability via slave labor, like the failure of that dynasty through black exclusion, symbolizes the early history of the nation and a class system based on the artificial construction of race. At the same time, *Absalom, Absalom!* is also a novel about mythmaking. From Rosa Coldfield’s initial summons to Quentin’s final reconstruction of the tale with his college roommate, Shreve McCannon, Faulkner’s characters engage in collective storytelling. As they add, subtract, deduce, speculate, and reinterpret the narrative, they also enact the process of cultural memory.

When called upon to hear Rosa’s version of the past, Quentin already knows some of the Sutpen story, which is “part of his twenty years’ heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man” (*Absalom*, 7). Quentin knows that Sutpen’s son Henry “served four years in the same company with his sister’s fiancé and then shot the fiancé to death before the gates to the house where the sister waited in her wedding gown on the eve of the wedding” (*Absalom*, 6). The motive for Henry’s actions is the mystery at the center of the novel.<sup>85</sup> Ultimately, the murder of Charles Bon is a story of race, class, filial denial, and a patriarch’s destructive retaliation against slavocracy. Thomas Sutpen conceives his design to avenge the insult he suffers as a youth, when he is sent by his father to

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<sup>83</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 295; Muhlenfeld, introduction to *William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!*, xi.

<sup>84</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936; New York: Vintage International, 1990), 6. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Absalom*.

<sup>85</sup> Floyd C. Watkins, “What Happens in *Absalom, Absalom!*?” in Muhlenfeld, *William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!*, 57.

deliver a message to the planter for whom the father works. Young Thomas Sutpen is unaware of class divisions until he is turned away from the front door by Pettibone's slave butler, who instructs him to go around to the back of the house. His identity forged at the moment of rejection, Thomas Sutpen spends the remainder of his life seeking to redress that affront. As Faulkner once told students at the University of Virginia, Sutpen wanted to prove that "man, if he is man, cannot be inferior to another man through artificial standards or circumstances."<sup>86</sup> To ensure that he would never again endure such an insult, Sutpen resolves to beat the planters on their own terms. According to Faulkner, Sutpen was "trying to say in his blundering way that, 'Why should a man be better than me because he's richer than me, that if I had had the chance I might be just as good as he thinks he is, so I'll make myself as good as he thinks he is by getting the same outward trappings which he has...'"<sup>87</sup> To achieve his design, Sutpen tells Quentin's grandfather he required "money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family— incidentally of course, a wife" (*Absalom*, 212). But in acquiring what he mistakes for signifiers of his own equality—wealth, land, a big house, slaves—Sutpen only reproduces the artificial standards of race and class that he sets out to conquer.<sup>88</sup>

The furthering of his design is the impetus for every marriage Thomas Sutpen enters or considers, all of which fail to achieve his goal. After traveling to Haiti, where he intends to make his fortune, Sutpen marries a woman whose mother, he is told, is part Spaniard. After the birth of their son, Sutpen learns that the woman's family lied and that she is descended from a black ancestor. Sutpen determines that the wife and son are not conducive to his design and repudiates them both. He then travels to Mississippi, where he makes a second attempt to realize his dynastic vision. In setting aside his first family and later refusing to acknowledge Charles Bon as his disinherited son, Sutpen

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<sup>86</sup> Faulkner, Gwynn, and Blotner, *Faulkner in the University*, 35.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Carolyn Porter, "The Significance of Thomas Sutpen," in Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner*, 151.

subscribes to the belief that a wife and child with a black ancestor cannot grant him the social respectability he believes he acquires by marrying Ellen Coldfield. Even that assumption is challenged on the night of the wedding by hecklers who sling vegetable refuse at the bride and groom as they exit the church. In the first of two post-Civil War attempts to bring his design to fruition, Sutpen makes and then breaks an engagement to Rosa Coldfield, whom he more than offends with the suggestion that they try to produce an heir and marry if the child is a boy. Sutpen apparently pursues the suggested course with Wash Jones's granddaughter Milly and then compares her with a mare that has just foaled when she gives birth to a daughter. With that insult, Sutpen provokes his murder at the hand of Wash Jones.

Despite repeated efforts to realize his design through marriage and the birth of white male heirs, Sutpen's second and longest running attempt reaches its catastrophic conclusion with the thwarted marriage of his daughter Judith and Charles Bon, the abandoned eldest son Sutpen refuses to recognize. In the account narrated by Quentin's father, Henry meets Charles Bon at the University of Mississippi and brings him to Sutpen's Hundred for a visit. Anticipating an engagement, Sutpen travels to New Orleans, where he learns of the woman Faulkner refers to as "the octoroon" and the young son she shares with Charles Bon. The implication that Sutpen uses this information to prevent Bon from marrying Judith is particularly ironic since, if that is Charles Bon's intention, such a marriage would replicate Sutpen's behavior and the past he attempts to deny. Similarly, Sutpen's formative moment is repeated at least twice in the novel, with Wash Jones and later Charles Bon occupying Sutpen's former role.<sup>89</sup> In the years before the war, Jones is "not even been allowed to approach the front of the house" (*Absalom*, 149). During the war, Jones sustains the occupants with fish, game, and vegetables; but even

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<sup>89</sup> John T. Irwin, "Fathers and Sons," in Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner*, 131; Carolyn Porter, "The Significance of Thomas Sutpen," in Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner*, 152; Richard Poirier, "'Strange Gods' in Jefferson Mississippi: Analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!*" in Muhlenfeld, *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!*, 7.

bearing these offerings, he advances “no nearer than the kitchen door,” where his entrance is barred by Clytie, the enslaved daughter of Thomas Sutpen (*Absalom*, 149). This custom changes after the war with Wash’s frequent entrance into the house, suggesting the collapse of the planter regime and the artificial trappings that Sutpen sought to overcome but only replicated. By having Sutpen die at Jones’s hand, Faulkner once said, he intended Wash to be emblematic of “the man who survived the Civil War.” As Faulkner explained, “The aristocrat in the columned house was ruined, but Wash Jones survived it unchanged.”<sup>90</sup>

While the moment of his rejection remains foremost in Sutpen’s memory, he fails to retain a clear sense of other elements of his past, including how he made his way to Haiti and an accurate accounting of his age. On this point, the text is no more precise. Based on Sutpen’s first known appearance in Jefferson in 1833 and his approximate age at the time, twenty-five, Quentin’s roommate Shreve calculates Sutpen’s birth year as 1808, while a chronology and genealogy appended to the narrative both record the date as 1807.<sup>91</sup> The placement of the two documents at the end of the novel in forms that appear to relate objective facts should not deceive readers into overestimating their credibility. While the chronology and genealogy introduce some information not previously revealed in the text, like the name of Thomas Sutpen’s first wife and Shreve McCannon’s surname, at times they also contradict earlier iterations of the Sutpen tale, several versions of which exist within the novel. The often conflicting narrative also suggests in microcosm the relationship of Faulkner’s individual works to the larger oeuvre set in Yoknapatawpha County. As Floyd C. Watkins explains, “Faulkner seems to have carried about in his head the whole history, folklore, and gossip for a century and a half of his invented private domain. Small episodes in the early fiction become dominant plots in the later

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<sup>90</sup> Faulkner, Gwynn, and Blotner, *Faulkner in the University*, 75.

<sup>91</sup> Duncan Aswell, “The Puzzling Design of *Absalom, Absalom!*” in Muhlenfeld, *William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!: A Critical Casebook*, 105.

works....Each story and each novel may be read as separate and independent or as part of an elaborate construction of a complex society. The reader may wonder at the marvelous tangles of facts and people, or he may be struck by Faulkner's careless forgettings, changes, and inconsistencies."<sup>92</sup> Watkins devotes an entire monograph to cataloging the inconsistencies of *Absalom, Absalom!*, which, he posits, may be Faulkner's way of signaling a narrator's unreliability.<sup>93</sup> If that is the case, readers must then determine which of the conflicting narratives or documents is the most credible, a virtually impossible task. Duncan Aswell suggests Faulkner may be "mocking our attempts to find logical connections between events" and that the chronology, in the end, "should make us question whether we have any of the facts straight about the Sutpen legend."<sup>94</sup> Ultimately, readers are left to perform the same interpretive work as Faulkner's narrators, who decipher information, assess its veracity, prioritize facts, and speculate about the unknown in order to construct a coherent version of the Sutpen tale.

Beyond the Sutpen legend, Faulkner's narrators also play fast and loose with the facts of history outside the fictional world of Yoknapatawpha. In one version of the Sutpen story, which Quentin hears from his father, Charles Bon is wounded at Shiloh. Shreve later decides that Mr. Compson is wrong, that Henry, not Bon, suffered the wound. The problem in both cases is that Henry and Bon's company, the University Greys, never fought at Shiloh. Arthur Kinney suggests Quentin may have confused the University Greys with another company, the Mississippi Greys,<sup>95</sup> but just as the *Absalom* narrators contradict each other, they also contradict verifiable historical facts, leaving readers to gauge once again whether the discrepancy discredits some or all of a narrator's account. If the University Greys never fought at Shiloh, does that mean Bon and Henry belonged to another company or that neither

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<sup>92</sup> Watkins, "What Happens in *Absalom, Absalom!*?" 55-56.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>94</sup> Aswell, "The Puzzling Design of *Absalom, Absalom!*" 105.

<sup>95</sup> Kinney, introduction to *Critical Essays on William Faulkner*, 20.



brother could have been shot in a battle he never fought? And what else does Quentin get wrong?

This sort of problem presents itself, perhaps most significantly, in the account of Thomas Sutpen's time in Haiti. The vague account, which is based on what Sutpen told Grandfather Compson, places him in physical combat with black insurrectionists in Haiti. Scholars have typically understood this to mean that Faulkner's narrators set Sutpen in a battle with slave rebels during the Haitian Revolution, which raged outside of Faulkner's fictional world between 1791 and 1804 and ended before Sutpen's birth. Faulkner may have misdated the Haitian Revolution, just as he has Bon and then Henry wounded at Shiloh, for purposes that Watkins and Aswell suggest of the novel's other inconsistencies. If Faulkner misdated the world's largest successful slave revolt by more than thirty years to signal the impossibility of Sutpen having fought the slave rebels in a revolution that ended well before he was born, then the inaccurate chronology discredits the myth of Sutpen's origins that is passed down through generations of the Compson men.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, the narrative identifies Sutpen's combatants in terms of race, not enslaved status, and since Faulkner never connects Sutpen's battle to any specific historical incident, Sutpen may have fought against free black Haitians who continued to press for their rights after the revolution. The last of these uprisings occurred in 1831 and would make for a plausible interpretation of Sutpen's experience in Haiti.<sup>97</sup>

Whatever the facts of Thomas Sutpen's origins, *Absalom, Absalom!* contrasts Sutpen's life and dynastic endeavors with major events in the history of abolition. Regardless of which date is actually

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<sup>96</sup> While often dismissed as authorial error, Richard Godden reads Sutpen's activities in Haiti as part of the Haitian Revolution and as an intentional rewriting of history that captures slavery's dynamic of threatened revolt and suppression by counter-violence. The ritualized combat in which Faulkner engages bondsmen brought from Haiti likewise lacks historical precedent; but when read in conjunction with the misdated revolution, Godden argues, "make[s] absolute historical sense." Godden explains, "Given that Faulkner wishes to foreground the continuous potential for revolution within the institution of slavery, he needs Haiti, the only successful black revolution. Given that he wishes to characterize the plantocracy as a class who suppress revolution, he requires that his ur-planter suppress the Haitian Revolution, and go on doing so." Richard Godden, "Absalom, Absalom! and Faulkner's Erroneous Dating of the Haitian Revolution," *Mississippi Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 489.

<sup>97</sup> Tonya R. Folsom, "Eulalia Bon's Untold Story," in Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner*, 217-218.

correct, Sutpen was born either in 1807, the year British Parliament banned the slave trade throughout the British Empire, or in 1808, the year the United States outlawed the importation of slaves from abroad. Continuing the pattern, Sutpen arrives in Jefferson and begins his second attempt at dynasty building in 1833, when an act of Parliament abolished slavery throughout most of the British Empire. Whether Sutpen's first attempt begins amid the Haitian Revolution or a smaller insurrection of free black Haitians, Sutpen repeatedly works against the abolitionist currents of history. The pattern culminates in the delay of Henry's fratricide until the end of the Civil War. In an irony apparently lost on Sutpen and the novel's narrators, Faulkner situates Sutpen's dynastic efforts against the collapse of slavery in the western hemisphere.

In his correspondence with Malcolm Cowley in preparation for *The Portable Faulkner*, Faulkner addressed the regional imbalance in literary production, particularly literature dealing with the Civil War. Cowley had observed that before and during the war, the strongest literature was produced by Northern writers, but more recently, he considered the most vital literature about the Civil War to have been a product of the South. In his reply, Faulkner explained the Southern aspect of the phenomenon largely in terms of class. Before the Civil War, he wrote, the South lacked a literate middle class to produce a literature. When men like Thomas Sutpen rose from their rural yeomen roots, "it was not to establish themselves as a middle class but to make themselves barons," like the large planters. In a predominantly oral culture, they repeated the stories and songs of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century England and Scotland, which they "passed from mouth to mouth because the generations couldn't write to record them." After eighty years, the unreconstructed Southerners had died off and "the strong among the remaining realized that to survive they must stop trying to be pre 1861 barons and become a middle class, they did so, and began to create a literature." Faulkner went on to say that the reason the South but not the North had produced a vital literature about the war was that "the Northerner had

nothing to write about regarding it. He won it. The only clean thing about War is losing it.”<sup>98</sup> His comments are intriguing not only because they connect the production of Southern literature to the same class issues that concern *Absalom, Absalom!* but also for what they suggest about who, among white Southerners, survived the war and why. “The strong among them” were the people who did not attempt to recreate the caste system of the prewar era. In *Absalom, Absalom!* however, Thomas Sutpen returns from the war and makes a third attempt to realize his design. His efforts to re-establish himself as a “pre 1861 baron” ultimately prove fatal as Sutpen’s treatment of Milly Jones provokes his murder by Wash Jones, the archetypal survivor of the Civil War.

The rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen as a planter aristocrat and a survivor of Haitian rebellions invites notable comparisons with *Gone With the Wind*. In *Absalom*, a poor (West) Virginia-born son of a yeoman farmer suffers an insult at the door of his father’s employer. He travels first to Haiti and then to Mississippi, where he acquires Chickasaw land by dubious means and amasses a fortune by slave labor. In *Gone With the Wind*, the poor Irish son of a tenant farmer suffers an insult from the landlord’s agent, murders the agent, and immigrates to Georgia. There, he acquires land wrested from the Creek Indians and amasses a fortune by slave labor. After he is pelted with vegetables on the night of his wedding, it is difficult to imagine how Sutpen could be unaware of the disdain he provokes in his fellow Jeffersonians. Gerald O’Hara, however, remains largely oblivious to the fact that his neighbors, all of highborn lineage, look down on the nouveau riche upstart, who finally achieves acceptance just as Sutpen acquires respectability, by marrying into it. Since all of his sons died in infancy, Gerald, like Sutpen after Henry’s repudiation and Bon’s death, has no male heir. Despite the parallels, Gerald remains a relatively minor figure, whose psychological disorder contributes to his daughter’s postwar responsibilities as head of the O’Hara family. While the big house affront seems to blur every memory of Sutpen’s life before that moment and leaves him focused on the realization of his design, the

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<sup>98</sup> Cowley and Faulkner, *The Faulkner-Cowley File*, 79.

compounded losses of the war, his wealth, and the death of his wife, leave Gerald unable to cope in the present. He takes refuge in the delusion of an earlier epoch when Ellen O'Hara still lived. In this "dim borderline country where time was standing still and Ellen was always in the next room," Gerald O'Hara waits his spouse's return (*GWTW*, 436). Occasionally, Gerald recalls his wife's death, but as Scarlett confides to Grandma Fontaine, "it's worse when he does remember that she's gone." In those rare instances, Gerald "jumps up suddenly," and sets out for the graveyard. When he returns, says Scarlett, he has "tears all over his face and he says over and over till I could scream: 'Katie Scarlett, Mrs. O'Hara is dead. Your mother is dead,' and it's just like I was hearing it again for the first time" (*GWTW*, 451). While his mental regression only adds to Scarlett's burden, the story of Gerald's self-making inspires his eldest daughter to drag herself and her dependents out of their postwar destitution. She finds similar encouragement from the story of her great-grandfather Prudhomme, who survived St. Domingue (accurately dated) to re-establish a slaveholding dynasty in Savannah. Where Sutpen's dynastic enterprise ultimately self-destructs, Mitchell sees no such causation in the demise of the Old South. The determination of Scarlett's forbears to reproduce the slaveholding regime is, in Mitchell's rendering, an act of resilience for Scarlett to emulate, along with her ancestors' willingness to exploit bound labor, as Scarlett does in her lumber mills.

Both Mitchell and Faulkner employ disease tropes as a commentary on the Civil War. In *Gone With the Wind*, the typhoid fever that kills Scarlett's mother and afflicts her sisters represents a form of class anxiety. Emmie Slattery, whom the novel repeatedly disparages as "white trash" and who later attempts to assume ownership of Tara alongside Jonas Wilkerson, is the first to fall ill. Just as Emmie begins to recover, Ellen O'Hara contracts the illness, which in her case proves fatal. By Mammy's account, the typhoid "[flew] right up the road" and sickened the O'Haras. As Mammy relates the story, the disease that kills Mrs. O'Hara is closely linked to antebellum poor whites who achieve class mobility after the war. When Scarlett next sees Emmie Slattery, she emerges from an "elegant

carriage” and is “dressed within in an inch of her life.” Scarlett admires the “stylish new clothes” until she recognizes “Emmie who had given typhoid to Ellen and killed her” (*GWTW*, 537).<sup>99</sup> Scarlett is enraged by Emmie’s presence and Jonas Wilkerson’s offer to buy Tara. Driven by motives similar to Thomas Sutpen’s, the newlyweds Wilkerson and Slattery want to “even past slights by living in the home where they had been slighted” (*GWTW*, 538). The equation of disease and social reordering in characters the slaveholding class formerly regarded as pariahs casts Reconstruction as a kind of social malady. Faulkner, too, employs disease to characterize the social upheaval of the Civil War and emancipation, but his version may be read as a refutation, if not of Mitchell directly, then of the ideology her typhoid metaphor embodies.

With the deaths of Judith and Charles Etienne from yellow fever, the undisclosed illness that afflicts Henry, and the burning of the mansion, Faulkner associates the Sutpens’ demise with two prior considerations of disease. Early in the novel, Faulkner writes of the Civil War as “the fever which had cured the disease,” suggesting slavery as the disease that plagued the South. He writes, too, of “stubborn back-looking ghosts” who after forty-three years are still recovering from the fever “without even knowing that it had been the fever itself they had fought against and not the sickness” (*Absalom*, 7). According to Faulkner, these white Southerners, “[look] with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret, weak from the fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence” (*Absalom*, 7). In a slight point of agreement—possibly the only one that exists between the two authors—both Margaret Mitchell and William Faulkner depict Lost Cause nostalgia as a form of social and cultural debilitation. But while Faulkner identifies the race- and slavery- based caste system as the sickness and the Civil War as the curing fever, Mitchell, to borrow Faulkner’s figuration, mistakes the cure for the disease.

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<sup>99</sup> Of Emmie Slattery’s role in *Gone With the Wind*, Julia Stern similarly observes, “In Mitchell’s imagination, Emmie Wilkerson, née Slattery, is the New South rising from the hell of war.” Julia A. Stern, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War Epic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 206.

In Faulkner's second consideration of disease, Quentin's father relates the story of an ailing aunt who inexplicably recovered her health after disposing of a certain troublesome garment. The aunt's closest female relative was a woman with whom she had long shared "bitter inexplicable...amicable enmities" (*Absalom*, 156). Convinced she would not survive a serious surgery and that the kinswoman would bury her in a brown dress she knew the aunt had never liked, the aunt had the dress set afire in the back yard and held up to her window where she could watch it burn. "As soon as the dress was consumed," Mr. Compson reveals, the aunt "began to mend." She survived the operation, outlived her kinswoman, and after a peaceful death of no apparent cause, was buried in her (presumably white) wedding dress (*Absalom*, 156). Her ultimate preference of burial garb suggests the aunt's anxiety that her kinswoman would deny her the mantle of whiteness.<sup>100</sup> But just as the clothing evokes race, the garments also speak to the constructed nature of that concept. Equating the aunt's racial anxiety with her physical malady and familial discord, Faulkner reprises the disease metaphor that he uses to explain Civil War memory in the white South. Here, not only slavery but the belief that race is a biological determinant and the basis for class division constitutes a compounded sickness that Faulkner literalizes in the brown dress and ultimately in the rotting Sutpen mansion—the symbol of Thomas Sutpen's baronage, which Clytie commits to flames.

In 1936, Faulkner had yet to pen his now famous line, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," but the essence of that statement is evident in *Absalom*.<sup>101</sup> In chapter two, Mr. Compson's narration includes a commentary on the difficulty of accessing and ascertaining the past from a "few old mouth to mouth tales," letters, and artifacts. In Compson's figuration, the actors—Henry, Judith, Charles Bon, Thomas Sutpen—"are there, yet something is missing." According Compson, "they are

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<sup>100</sup> My understanding of this passage is based on course content from Julia Stern, English 371-0 American Novel: Faulkner, Race, and Politics, Northwestern University, Winter Quarter 2001.

<sup>101</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (1950; New York: Vintage International, 2011), 73.

like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest...you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read tedious and intent...you bring them together again and again nothing happens..." (*Absalom*, 80). Later, however, Quentin suggests a different historical and narrative phenomenon. "Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished," thinks Quentin. "Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky" (*Absalom*, 210). The image of a pebble sending ripples on a pond, the idea that a single event reverberates indefinitely through time and space suggests a model of historical transmission and thus cultural memory. As Quentin imagines concentric circles all connected by umbilici, all emanating from the same center, he evokes a generational transmission from storyteller to listener. Each participant reinterprets the narrative, altering the essence of a story that with each retelling becomes further removed the original event. Adding inferences and suppositions to the collection of known facts, each new narrator modifies the story on a molecular level and creates a new composition.

As that process occurs in the novel, Quentin and his roommate Shreve construct a final version of the Sutpen tale from the fragments of information Quentin learns from Rosa Coldfield and his father and from what he observes when he accompanies Rosa to the Sutpen property. In Quentin and Shreve's revision, the motive for murder changes from Mr. Compson's assumption that Henry disapproves of bigamy to Quentin and Shreve's belief that Henry's objection has more to do with incest and miscegenation. According to Mr. Compson, no one ever quite knew what transpired between Henry and his father when Sutpen supposedly told him about Bon's mistress. What is known of the episode came by the "cabin-to-cabin whispering" of slaves, who reported "that Henry and Bon

had ridden away in the dark and that Henry had formally abjured his home and birthright” (*Absalom*, 84). Mr. Compson imagines that since Henry had grown up in a house with a similar arrangement involving his enslaved half-sister Clytie, he would not have been bothered by Bon’s mistress and child but rather by the fact that a morganatic ceremony had occurred between Bon and the woman. In Mr. Compson’s reasoning, it was “a ceremony entered into, to be sure, with a negro, yet still a ceremony.” He then imagines Bon making the case to Henry that the first ceremony with the boy’s mother was a “shibboleth meaningless as a child’s game” (*Absalom*, 87, 93). Quentin’s father speculates that “as time passed ... Henry became accustomed to that first ceremony which was still no marriage,” but then revises his own notion of Henry’s objections. He supposes, “that may have been the trouble with Henry—not the two ceremonies but the two women; not the fact that Bon’s intention was to commit bigamy but that it was apparently to make his (Henry’s) sister a sort of junior partner in a harem” (*Absalom*, 94). According to Quentin’s father, the Civil War functions as probationary period between Henry and Bon, while they wait to see what Henry decides to do about the marriage. Even so, Mr. Compson says, Quentin carries a wounded Bon to safety, but Shreve later determines that Quentin’s father was wrong; actually, Henry was the one who was wounded. In a later rendering, however, the Civil War is also a “tide of the names of lost battles from either side,” owing largely to the incompetence of “generals who should not have been generals.” These men received appointments “not through training in contemporary methods or aptitude for learning them,” but “by the divine right to say ‘Go there’ conferred upon them by an absolute caste system” (*Absalom*, 276). According to Faulkner, the command structure of the armies reflects the social structure of civilian society. Military rank is awarded according to social caste, and untrained, unqualified officers lead their armies to disaster. While later novels like Michael Shaara’s *The Killer Angels* highlight the command failures of the Civil War, for Faulkner, even the military defeats can be traced to the problem of social class divisions.



Quentin and Shreve determine that Henry would not have been bothered by Bon's mistress and child or the appearance of bigamy. They believe Henry would have considered this merely something else about Bon to imitate (*Absalom*, 268). In Mr. Compson's account, "nobody ever did know if Bon ever knew Sutpen was his father or not" or whether he first entertained a marriage to Judith in order to avenge Sutpen's treatment of his mother (*Absalom*, 216). In Quentin and Shreve's version, when Sutpen summons Henry and tells him whatever causes Henry to repudiate his birthright, the revelation is not about Bon's mistress and child but the fact that Bon is Henry's brother. In this final version of the story, Quentin and Shreve assume that Bon does know Sutpen is his father and that he learned the fact from his mother (*Absalom*, 238). The college roommates invent a conversation in which Bon tells Henry that Sutpen could have prevented the marriage simply by calling Bon to him, but instead their father refused even this sign of recognition. "He should have told me," the roommates imagine Bon saying to Henry. "He should have told me, myself, himself. I was fair and honorable with him. I waited. You know now why I waited. I gave him every chance to tell me himself. But he didn't do it. If he had, I would have agreed and promised never to see her or you again. But he didn't tell me" (*Absalom*, 72). Shreve and Quentin imagine Bon saying he first thought Sutpen didn't know Bon was the son he abandoned, but then Bon realized Sutpen did know and said nothing. In Quentin and Shreve's account, Bon says he continued to wait but Sutpen only told Henry and "sent me a message like you send a command by a nigger servant to a beggar or a tramp to clear out" (*Absalom*, 272). In this rendering, the father's denial of the eldest son is equivalent to the treatment young Thomas Sutpen suffers at the planter's front door. Attempting to avenge that affront with a design that requires him to reject his multiracial son, Sutpen duplicates his original insult. Four years after Henry repudiates his birthright, Colonel Sutpen rides to the headquarters of Grandfather Compson's old regiment and asks to speak to Henry (*Absalom*, 222). By then, Bon has written to Judith that she should prepare for a wedding. As in their earlier conversation, Sutpen tells Henry that Bon cannot marry Judith but this

time explains that his first father-in-law lied about the first wife's ancestry and that Bon's mother was "part negro" (*Absalom*, 283). After the meeting, Bon discerns that though Henry assented to an incestuous marriage between siblings, news of Bon's maternal ancestry has changed the matter. Quentin and Shreve imagine him saying to Henry, "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can't bear" (*Absalom*, 285).

In the early pages of the novel, as Quentin attempts to discern the reason for Rosa's Coldfield summons, Quentin supposes, "It's because she wants it told," so that he can write the story and people will "read it and know at last why God let us [the white South] lose the War" (*Absalom*, 6). According to Eric Sundquist, "Without exception...throughout Faulkner's fiction," slavery is the answer to Quentin's question, "Why God let us lose the War" (*Absalom*, 123).<sup>102</sup> As Sundquist explains,

Slavery controlled miscegenation and whatever incest accompanied it by denying that they had any meaning, by denying, in effect, that any limits had actually been violated. Emancipation not only released a convulsive hysteria about potential miscegenation in the form of black violence against white, then, it may also be said to have destroyed the mechanisms of control that were a barrier to incest and to have made possible, if not entirely likely, a further mixing, a "monstrous" violation of blood in which, because both black and white strains could be hidden from view, miscegenation and incest could indeed occur at once.<sup>103</sup>

As Sundquist argues, Henry's murder of Bon to prevent miscegenation allows him to ignore the incest and to "[assert] that Bon is not his brother and not his father's son." For Henry to acknowledge Bon as his brother "he would have had to recognize the legitimacy of a paternity his allegiance to his father, and to the South, finally will not permit." If Henry had not killed Bon, explains Sundquist, "incest and miscegenation would have become more than ever the 'monstrous double' whose existence the Southern slaveholding design must deny."<sup>104</sup> Later novels, especially Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* and Geraldine Brooks's *March*, address the problem of incest from the perspective of ex-slaves

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<sup>102</sup> Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), 123.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

and suggest what might be understood as a revised version of the “monstrous double” in which incest compounds the abomination of sexual abuse that slave women suffer at the hands of masters who are also their fathers and brothers.

In *Absalom, Absalom*, the explanation at which Quentin and Shreve finally arrive for Bon’s murder—that Henry’s abhorrence of miscegenation trumped his aversion to incest—is, according to Erskine Peters, indicative of the culture at large:

Henry’s moment of decision to kill Bon to prevent the marriage to Judith is the instant in which the ultimate sensibility of the culture and its truest values are exposed.... Miscegenation is not seen at all as the mixing of the races, which the Southern fathers have carried out as a prerogative of their power over blacks, but becomes the abominable notion of introducing black blood into the white race. The double racial standard is apparent. Sex forced upon the black woman by the white man is tolerated and so is the offspring. But when occurring between a black man and a white woman it is all an abomination.<sup>105</sup>

Bearing in mind that the final version of the Sutpen tale is the highly speculative invention of Quentin and Shreve, the cultural values reflected in the story reveal as much, if not more, about the narrators of 1910-11 as they do about the actors of the 1860s. Even more telling is that in 1936, Faulkner’s story of slavery, Civil War, and filial denial hinges on white anxiety about miscegenation and the return of an unacknowledged son, who ostensibly “passes” as white. To whatever degree the novel can be read as a criticism of those cultural values, *Absalom, Absalom!* remains a tale told by white Mississippians, with the participation of Quentin’s Canadian roommate. The problem of reconciling multiple perspectives is compounded by the fact that in *Absalom, Absalom!* none of the African American characters have their say. Scenes depicting Sutpen and slaves in physical combat highlight the inherent violence of chattel bondage, but for Faulkner’s willingness to imagine what slavery and the Civil War meant to slaves, readers must look to his other fiction of the same period.

From 1934 to 1936, Faulkner published a series of short stories in the *Saturday Evening Post* and one in *Scribner’s* that were reissued in 1938 as a single novel, *The Unvanquished*. All of the

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<sup>105</sup> Erskine E. Peters, “The Bon Lineage,” in Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner*, 209.

stories are narrated by Bayard Sartoris. The “Old Bayard” of Faulkner’s 1929 novel *Sartoris/Flags in the Dust* appears in the first of the *Unvanquished* tales as the twelve-year-old son of a Confederate officer. The father, John Sartoris, leads an irregular cavalry unit he formed after his first regiment voted to replace the colonel with his second-in-command, Thomas Sutpen; the elder Sartoris never forgave Sutpen for the ouster. The narrating Bayard remembers Sutpen as “underbred” and a “cold ruthless man” who appeared one day from parts unknown, acquired land and money by equally mysterious means—the town speculated that he robbed steamboats—then “built a big house, married and set up as a gentleman.”<sup>106</sup> Bayard’s account contains only the sparse facts known to the town: Sutpen lost his fortune in the war and the possibility of descendants when Sutpen’s son killed his sister’s fiancé and disappeared. Recounting how sixty-year-old Sutpen returned “singlehanded to rebuild his plantation,” Bayard seems to admire Sutpen’s effort (*Unvanquished*, 222). When John Sartoris swallows his grudge to try to enlist Sutpen in his “knight riders,” Sutpen replies, “I’m for my land. If every man of you would rehabilitate his own land, the country will take care of itself” (*Unvanquished*, 222). Far from the national allegory Sutpen represents in *Absalom, Absalom!* the narrator of *The Unvanquished* suggests Sutpen’s determination as an alternative to the racial violence instigated by his own father. In the course of *The Unvanquished*, John Sartoris murders two freedmen organizers and hijacks an election to stop former slave Cassius Benbow from being voted town marshal.

*The Unvanquished* assumes this darker tone, only after the death of Bayard’s grandmother. Granny Rosa Millard is murdered by a band of raiders known as Grumby’s Independents when she tries to perpetrate the same scheme on Grumby’s men that she used to defraud the Federal army. Millard requisitions livestock with forged military orders, has Ab Snopes resell the stolen animals back

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<sup>106</sup> William Faulkner, *The Unvanquished* (1938; repr., New York: Vintage International, 1991), 222. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Unvanquished*.

to the army, and uses the proceeds to succor Confederate widows and orphans. Granny hatches the plan from her earlier experience with the army's administrative dysfunction. With her grandson Bayard and the enslaved child Ringo in tow, Granny attempts to reclaim two slaves and a trunk of family silver last seen in the company of Federal troops. After a series of bureaucratic snafus, Granny finds herself in possession not only of the property she originally sought but a surplus of ten silver-filled chests, 110 mules, and as many slaves. The bondspeople have never seen her before but reportedly are willing travel with her. About half have fled their masters in Alabama. Granny instructs them to return home, supplies them with food for the journey, and admonishes the travelers not to let her hear of them "straggling off like this again" (*Unvanquished*, 115). What the migrants choose to do after they and Granny Millard part ways is anyone's guess. Even if the reader allows for undisclosed motives on the part of the ex-bondspeople who do manage to obtain provisions, the exchange so strongly evokes slaveholder paternalism that it seems to contradict the yearning for freedom suggested by the freedpeople's migration. Throughout their travels, Granny Millard and the boys encounter multitudes of itinerant ex-slaves, who have taken to the road in pursuit of their freedom. Faulkner's representation of that desire and volition on the part of freedpeople—and in such large numbers—suggests yet another point of contrast with Mitchell, whose ex-slaveholders adhere to the delusion that slaves identify with their former masters and only run off out of fear of the approaching Yankees.

With Bayard's playfellow Ringo and Ringo's uncle Loosh, Faulkner offers a complex and sometimes contradictory portrait of master-bondsmen relations. In "Ambuscade," the first of the short stories that compose *The Unvanquished*, Bayard and Ringo overhear Loosh announce the imminent arrival of Sherman's army. His skeptical fellow bondspeople judge Loosh a "black fool" and dismiss the news as too good to be true (*Unvanquished*, 23). Despite their disbelief, the slaves' conversation frames the U.S. Army as a force of liberation. To Bayard, the prospect of freedom means that he, Granny, and the slaves, will be driven out of their house with no place to live. As revealed in a

subsequent nightmare, Bayard interprets freedom to mean that every member of his household, black and white, will be lost and wandering “forever more without any home to go to because we were forever free” (*Unvanquished*, 25). As told by the narrator, Ringo identifies not with the adult slaves but with Bayard and his interpretation of freedom. Attempting to shoot the Yankee liberators, the boys accidentally kill a horse and end up hiding from the army under Granny’s skirts. This incident anticipates the slave youth’s subsequent crime partnership with Granny. Notably, Ringo forges the military orders in the plot against the U.S. Army.

Though he credits Ringo with an innate aptitude for writing, the narrator owes his own literacy to Loosh, who first taught Bayard to write his name. By the time the narrator recalls this detail, Loosh has long since departed with the Union troops. Loosh and his wife Philadelphy are the two slaves Granny sets out to reclaim when she discovers her opportunity to defraud the U.S. Army. Early in “Ambuscade,” Loosh proves well informed on troop movements when he correctly states that Bayard’s father is no longer in Tennessee as everyone believes. The boys later observe a secret late night departure by Loosh, who returns with the news of imminent freedom. His subversive information gathering and the subsequent revelation of literacy are enough to cast Loosh as the most rebellious of Faulkner’s bondsmen, but his resistance is most overt in his farewell confrontation with Granny.

Throughout the chapter “Retreat,” the notion of borrowing serves as a thinly guised euphemism for theft. When John Sartoris wants to know how Bayard and Ringo acquired the horse they are riding, Bayard answers, “We borrowed it.” “Who from?” asks John. “We aint know,” Ringo explains, “The man wasn’t there.” The conversation, which incites laughter from one of Sartoris’s irregular cavalymen, is reproduced almost verbatim when John Sartoris and the boys return home to find Rosa Millard with a team of horses they have never seen. Granny, the moral guardian who makes Bayard and Ringo wash their mouths out with soap for lying or cursing, explains that she “borrowed” the team but doesn’t know from whom because the owner was not at home (*Unvanquished*, 71). Between these

nearly identical conversations, John Sartoris acquires another horse for Ringo to ride; “You mean hit belong to me?” Ringo asks. “No,” says Sartoris, adopting the boys’ circumlocution, “You borrowed it” (*Unvanquished*, 63). Ringo’s misadventures with the half-blind horse, who does not want to be ridden, and the recurrent habit of “borrowing” without permission sets a comic tone but one that eventually culminates in a serious confrontation between slave and mistress.

Before departing with Federal soldiers, Loosh shows them where Granny Millard and John Sartoris have buried the aforementioned chest of silver. In divulging the location to the army, Loosh not only aids in confiscating the property, he nullifies Granny and John’s considerable efforts at preserving the valuables. As Loosh confirms his departure and declares, “I dont [sic] belong to John Sartoris no; I belongs to me and God,” the story arrives at a final question of ownership. The silver, Granny asserts, belongs to John Sartoris; who is Loosh to give it away? Loosh replies, “Let God ax John Sartoris who the man name that give me to him. Let the man that buried me in the black dark ax that of the man what dug me free.” Loosh disputes his master’s claim of ownership and pronounces slavery a theft of human beings. Comparing the theft of his person to the buried silver Granny insists he has no right to give away, Loosh characterizes slavery as a form of live burial and suggests the related concept of slavery as social death, in which the slave has no social existence beyond a relationship to the master (*The Unvanquished*, 75).<sup>107</sup>

The story concludes with Granny and the boys’ pronouncement on the soldiers who torch the Sartoris house, a verdict they probably also intend to apply to Loosh.<sup>108</sup> Together, Bayard, Ringo, and Granny cry, “The bastuds! The bastuds!” For an earlier use of the same “obscene language,” Granny

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<sup>107</sup> On slavery as social death and its related dynamic of live burial see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 38 and Julia Stern, “Live Burial and Its Discontents: Mourning Becomes Melancholia in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” in *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century’s End*, ed. Peter Homans (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 69.

<sup>108</sup> The house burning may be interpreted as a partial fulfillment of Bayard’s earlier equation of freedom and homelessness; subsequent chapters find the Sartoris clan residing in one of their old slave cabins.

sentences Bayard to wash his mouth out with soap (*The Unvanquished*, 27, 35). Now, the champion of polite speech and slaveholder property rights becomes the punch line of her own failed morality. Granny's confrontation with Loosh and what she must regard as a triple dispossession of house, silver and slaves, so discombobulates the pious matriarch, she shrieks the same profanity for which she has already punished her grandson.

The publication of *The Unvanquished* as a novel and the addition of subsequent chapters partially undercut the resolution of "Retreat" as a stand-alone short story. In the next chapter for instance, Granny decides that she can simply demand the return of silver and slaves and sets out to reclaim them from the army. His pattern of resistance renders Loosh exceptional among Faulkner's individual slave characters, though as Granny and the boys later encounter freedpeople on the move by thousands, Faulkner also suggests something broadly representative in Loosh's self-liberation. Even as Faulkner allows the last word to Granny and her wards, the story's climax remains that moment when Loosh claims possession of himself and his freedom. As he assumes a moral authority over Granny, Loosh also suggests the silver seizure as partial retribution for the theft of his personhood. Though John Sartoris is cited as the legal slave owner, the confrontation occurs between Loosh and the arbiter of Sartoris family morality. Faulkner's willingness to acknowledge a power shift in that exchange and to consider how Loosh perceives his slavery and freedom sets his story worlds apart from the homage to slaveholder paternalism Mitchell ventriloquizes through Sam.



## Chapter 2

### Memories of Ex-Slaves and their Descendants, from the 1930s to World War II: The Federal Writer's Project, *12 Million Black Voices*, and the "Hunger" of Richard Wright

In the same year that *Gone With the Wind* first appeared in print, government workers in seventeen states began a national effort to document slavery from the point of view of the enslaved. From 1936 to 1938, employees of the Federal Writer's Project, a subsidiary of the Works Projects Administration, interviewed former slaves about their lives and experience in bondage.<sup>1</sup> After the project concluded, more than 2,300 interviews were deposited in the Rare Books Division of the Library of Congress. *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves* covered aspects of slave life from food, clothing, and shelter to work routines and social customs. Informants also told of the cruelty and violence they endured and witnessed masters inflict on other slaves. Here, the memories of slavery's survivors collectively disputed the popular myth of a benign, paternal institution. In his introduction to the collection, chief editor Benjamin Botkin reflected, "For the first and the last time, a large number of surviving slaves... have been permitted to tell their own story, in their own way."<sup>2</sup> *Slave Narratives*, Botkin wrote, was "the most authentic and colorful source of our knowledge of the lives and thoughts of thousands of slaves."<sup>3</sup> Though an exhaustive review of the complete *Slave Narratives* collection exceeds the scope of this study, an examination of the interviews conducted in Georgia reveals how the lived experience of ex-slaves, specifically those who resided in Margaret Mitchell's home state, contradicted the 1930s' most popular

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<sup>1</sup> Though some state offices had independently conducted ex-slave interviews, the national office of the FWP began directing the effort in 1936.

<sup>2</sup> B.A. Botkin, introduction to Federal Writer's Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, pp.viii-ix, Administrative Files, Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives From the Federal Writer's Project, 1936-1938, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/mesnbibVolumes1.html>.

<sup>3</sup> B.A. Botkin, introduction, *Slave Narratives*, p. ix.

narratives about the slave past. Ex-bondspeople in Georgia were bought and sold and separated from their families. Comparisons of their treatment to that of livestock recur several times in the interviews. Georgia slaves suffered severe whippings, broken bones, sexual abuse, and sometimes death at the hands of their masters and mistresses. Former bondspeople also told remarkable tales of resistance, how they rejoiced in freedom, and how exploitation continued even after emancipation.

The Georgia narratives include accounts of both the domestic and international slave trades. Phil Towns was among the informants who told of African parents or grandparents who survived the Middle Passage. Towns's grandmother and grandfather both were brought from Africa. His interviewer failed to record specific details but reported that the grandparents' account of "cruel treatment" was Towns's "most vivid recollection."<sup>4</sup> Benny Dillard's mother, Nancy, was sixteen when she "got to America from a trip on de water dat took nigh 6 months to make." Nancy was then transported from Virginia to Georgia, where she was sold to an Elbert County planter.<sup>5</sup> Dosia Harris said her grandmother was brought "from de homeland of de black folks." The grandmother, who never learned to speak English "right plain," was sold in December, but the journey that took her to Greene County took several more months. During that time, Harris's grandmother and her fellow slaves rose before dawn and were "driv lak cows" with a man posted at the front and rear of the group to prevent anyone from running away.<sup>6</sup> Jennie Kendricks heard stories from her grandmother about how slave traders had brought her with a group of other children from Virginia, an experience she likened to being treated like "a herd of cattle." When they passed through a town, the children were forced "to dance through the streets and act lively so that the chances for selling them would be greater."<sup>7</sup> Tom McGruder was

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<sup>4</sup> Phil Towns, interview by Adella S. Dixon, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 4, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Benny Dillard, interview by Grace McCune, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, pp. 287-288.

<sup>6</sup> Dosia Harris, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, pp. 108-109.

<sup>7</sup> Jennie Kendricks, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 3, p. 1.

sold three times after he, his mother, and his sister were brought to Georgia from Virginia. As McGruder told his interviewer, “We wuz put on the block just like cattle and sold to one man today and another tomorrow.”<sup>8</sup>

The slave trade often meant the breakup of families. Bryant Huff’s father, Daniel, ran away after his master whipped one of Daniel’s twelve children. Knowing Daniel’s devotion to his spouse, the master placed Daniel’s wife and their baby in jail. Daniel was allowed to visit once without being apprehended, but on his second visit, he was taken into custody and sold, along with his son Johnie, to slave speculators. The traders promised to take father and son so far away that they could not return to their family, but Daniel instructed his wife to wait for him. According to the interviewer, the wife “grieved over [Daniel’s] departure and refused, although urged, to marry again.” Before the end of the Civil War, Daniel did return. After emancipation, the oldest of the Huff children, who had been sold to a judge on a nearby plantation, also reunited with the family. Johnie, however, was “accidently killed” soon after he was sold.<sup>9</sup>

Among the accounts of Georgia’s ex-slaves, Huff’s family reunion is virtually unprecedented. More often, the breakup of slave families through sale meant the permanent loss of filial connections. For Rhodus Walton, who lived near an auction block, one of the most vivid childhood memories was “[watching] slaves emerge from boxcars, where they had been packed so closely that there was no room to sit, to be sold to the highest bidder.”<sup>10</sup> Walton was sold when he was three weeks old, along with his mother and two youngest siblings. They left behind Walton’s father and thirteen other children. Walton did not know where his family had been held in bondage or the name of the person who owned them, and after emancipation, he had no way of locating his missing relatives. Julia

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<sup>8</sup> Tom McGruder, interview by Elizabeth Watson, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 3, p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Bryant Huff, interview by Adella S. Dixon, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, p. 239.

<sup>10</sup> Rhodus Walton, interview by Adella S. Dixon, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 4, p. 123.

Brown's uncle was married to a woman who lived on another plantation; when he went to visit his wife, the uncle discovered she had been sold to a speculator, and he could not learn her whereabouts.<sup>11</sup> Henderson Harrison, whose mother and father were sold away when he was a baby, had no knowledge of his parents except their names.<sup>12</sup> On the morning of the day she was sold, Mary Ferguson had an ominous feeling. Later, Ferguson told her interviewer, when her master drove up with two white men and told her to collect her clothes, "I c'menced cryin' an' beggin' Mr. Shorter to not let 'em take me away," but her pleas were denied. As they departed the Maryland plantation, the slave traders' buggy drove by the fields where Ferguson's parents were working. Ferguson remembered, "I calt out as loud as I could an', as long as I could see 'em, 'good-bye, Ma!' 'good-bye, Ma!' But she never hearded me." The traders kept Ferguson out of sight on the floor of the buggy and sang to drown out her cries. Ferguson was taken to Baltimore, where she was "herded together" with wagon loads of other slaves and shipped by boat to Savannah. Finally, she was sent to Macon where she was auctioned and bought by a doctor. The day of her initial sale was the last time Mary Ferguson ever saw her parents and siblings.<sup>13</sup>

The testimony of Georgia's ex-slaves portrays violence as a central feature of the slaveholding relationship. As Rev. W.B. Allen, who grew up in Alabama, explained to his interviewer, "The name, 'overseer', was a synonym for 'slave driver', 'cruelty', 'brutishness.'"<sup>14</sup> The long list of offenses for which Allen had personally known slaves beaten to death included, "leaving home without a pass, talking back to—'sassing'—a white person, hitting another Negro, fussing, fighting, and rukkussing in the quarters, lying, loitering on their work,[and]taking things—the Whites called it stealing." Allen

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<sup>11</sup> Julia Brown, interview by Geneva Tonsill, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, pp. 143-144.

<sup>12</sup> Henderson Harris, interview by Mary A. Crawford, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Ferguson, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, pp. 326-328.

<sup>14</sup> Rev. W.B. Allen, interview by J.R. Jones, June 29, 1937, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, pp. 14-15.

reported that slaves who were whipped might “say some hard things to the white man with the strap in his hand,” but they could expect to “pay for it dearly.” According to Allen, “when a slave showed spirit that way the master or overseer laid the lash on all the harder.”<sup>15</sup> Rachel Adams reported that where she was held in bondage, if the slaves did not complete their tasks in the allotted time or perform to the overseer’s satisfaction, he would “beat us down in a minute.”<sup>16</sup> Nancy Boudry’s master did not have an overseer and administered punishment himself. Boudry recalled, “Sometimes dey whup me. Dey whup me bad, pull de cloes off down to de wais’.”<sup>17</sup> The oldest child of Leah Garrett’s cousin was tasked with caring for her master’s grandchild. When the slave girl fell down a set of stairs while holding the baby, the master’s wife and daughter reacted as if the baby were “dead or dyin’.” The master struck the slave child over the head with a board and killed her. He then ordered his slaves to throw the little girl’s body in the river.<sup>18</sup> Garrett also related the story of a slave who lived for seven years in a cave. According to Garrett, the woman’s mistress “jumped on her ’bout something,” and the slave woman “hit her back.” The mistress threatened to have the slave placed in stocks and beaten, so the slave’s husband concealed her in a cave that they furnished like a house. According to Garrett, the woman gave birth to three children while living in the cave and did not leave her hiding place until after she was legally a free woman.<sup>19</sup> During the Civil War, in 1863 or 1864, the black foreman left in charge by his master tried to whip Mary Gladdy’s father. When Gladdy’s father resisted, the foreman enlisted five other slaves to overpower him, to no avail. Finally, said Gladdy, “this foreman shot my daddy with a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Adams, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, p.4.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy Boudry, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, pp.113-114.

<sup>18</sup> Leah Garrett, interview by Louise Oliphant, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, pp. 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

shot-gun, inflicting wounds from which he never fully recovered.”<sup>20</sup> When patrollers caught Alice Green’s father off his plantation without a pass, they “beat him so bad you couldn’t lay your hand on him nowhar dat it warn’t sore.”<sup>21</sup> Heard Griffin described his former master as “the meanest man I’ve ever known.” According to Heard, Mike Griffin frequently beat slaves without provocation and once beat a woman so severely, she died later that night.<sup>22</sup> Pol (Polly) Tucker owned a woman who had a baby she was only allowed to see “just as a cow would be let in to her calf at certain times of the day.” While the slave mother worked in the field, the baby cried, and Tucker “either threw or kicked” the child into the yard, an act that ultimately proved fatal.<sup>23</sup> Henry Wright remembered that his master owned a mulatto slave who had been promised his freedom when he turned twenty-one years old. When the slave reached that age, the master refused to manumit him, and the slave attempted to burn down his master’s house. Wright saw the sheriff take the arsonist into custody and later heard that the slave had been hanged. Wright also reported that he received several whippings for attempting to escape. Once when his master attempted to whip him, Wright struck his owner and ran away for six months. When he returned, Wright received no punishment, as his owner was satisfied not to have lost a valuable human chattel.<sup>24</sup>

The Georgia narratives also include a compilation of ex-slave interviews from Richmond County that specifically documents the abuse of slaves. This compilation consists of direct quotations from various interviews, but the document does not identify the sources of these accounts, possibly due to the explicit nature of the testimony. This compilation includes the account of an overseer who

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Gladdy, interview by J.R. Jones, July 30, 1936, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Alice Green, interview by Corry Fowler, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Heard Griffin, interview by Minnie B. Ross, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> Eliza Williamson, interview by Josephine Lowell, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 4, p. 149.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Wright, interview by E. Driskell, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 4, pp. 201-202.

sexually harassed a young slave girl until she ran away and took shelter at the home of the informant. When the informant's master learned of the girl's presence, he told her she would have to leave. She hid in the woods until hunger drove her back to her master's place, where the overseer resumed his harassment. Finally, the girl "told him flat footed she warn't goin' with him." The overseer responded by striking her in the back with a cow hide. According to the unnamed source, the girl's mother had to stop her from drowning herself in a lake.<sup>25</sup>

Other anonymous accounts also related stories of sexual exploitation. As one interview subject explained, "In them times white men went with colored gals and women bold. Any time they saw one and wanted her, she had to go with him, and his wife didn't say nothin' 'bout it."<sup>26</sup> When one ex-slave rebuffed her young master's advances, he retaliated by trying to beat her. According the woman's account,

His mother got mad with me for fightin' him back and I told her why he had beat me. Well then she sent me to the courthouse to be whipped for fightin' him. They had stocks there where most people would send their slaves to be whipped. These stocks was in the shape of a cross, and they would strap your clothes up around your waist and have nothin' but your naked part out to whip. They didn't care about who saw your nakedness. Anyway they beat me that day until I couldn't sit down. When I went to bed I had to lie on my stomach to sleep. After they finished whippin' me, I told them they needn't think they had done somethin' by strippin' me in front of all them folk 'cause they had also stripped their mamas and sisters. God had made us all, and he made us just alike.<sup>27</sup>

Afterward, the woman was taken to a slave trader's office and sold to a man who had a reputation for cruelty. According to the informant, the man's wife was jealous of the slave's light skin and threatened to leave if the husband did not sell the woman, who was then taken back to the trader's office.<sup>28</sup>

Also included in the Richmond County compilation is an account of the slave market and how

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<sup>25</sup> "Compilation Richmond County Ex-Slave Interviews Mistreatment of Slaves," *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 4, p. 292.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 292-293.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 293-294.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

the potential for childbearing and physical comeliness factored into the buying and selling of slave women. The account lays bare the commodification of slave reproduction and frankly acknowledges multiracial slave children who were born of coerced sexual relationships between masters and slaves.

According to the informant,

The market was in the middle of Broad and Center Streets. They made a scaffold whenever they was goin' to sell anybody, and would put the person up on this so everybody could see him good. Then they would sell him to the highest bidder. Everybody wanted women who would have children fast. They would always ask you if you was a good breeder, and if so they would buy you at your word, but if you had already had too many chillun, they would say you warn't much good. If you hadn't ever had any chillun, your marster would tell 'em you was strong, healthy, and a fast worker. You had to have somethin' about you to be sold. Now sometimes, if you was a real pretty young gal, somebody would buy you without knowin' anythin' 'bout you, just for yourself. Before my old marster died, he had a pretty gal he was goin' with and he wouldn't let her work nowhere but in the house, and his wife nor nobody else didn't say nothin' 'bout it; they knowed better. She had three chillun for him and when he died his brother come and got the gal and the chillun.<sup>29</sup>

The anonymous accounts also include the story of a mistress who cut off a baby's hand because her husband was the child's father. According to the informant, the husband beat his wife and nearly killed her but relented at the wife's pleadings. The husband continued his sexual relationship with the baby's mother, however, and the bondswoman gave birth to more children.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the people interviewed by the FWP also reported being the children of their former masters or overseers or told of family members born of such relationships. Isaiah Green's grandmother Betsy Willis was the daughter of the man who owned her. When her master placed her on the auction block, he reportedly made the statement, "I wish to sell a slave who is also my daughter." As a condition of the sale, he stipulated that any buyer "must agree not to treat her as a slave but as a free person," though the father had already violated that condition by initiating the sale.<sup>31</sup> Carrie Mason's

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Isaiah Green, interview by Minnie B. Ross, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, p. 50.



husband, George, was the son of a slave mother and her white master. Mason also related the story of a master rumored to have instructed his sons to go to the slave quarters and “git me mo’ slaves,” implying they should coerce slave women into sexual relationships to produce more slave offspring.<sup>32</sup> Henry Nix was the son of a slave woman and a plantation overseer, who was compelled to leave the plantation when the master learned “what kind of man John Nix was.” Henry’s mother told him of his true paternity on her deathbed.<sup>33</sup> In a related matter, William Ward, who was owned by former Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown, reported the extremes to which Brown exerted his authority over bondspeople’s sexual relationships. Brown’s slaves had no say in choosing their partners. Brown alone decided which couples to pair together. Ward’s interviewer recorded that “married couples were not permitted to sleep together except when the husband received permission to spend the night with his wife.”<sup>34</sup>

Other tales of abuse included a woman who was ordered to scrub her master’s house the day after she gave birth to twins. When the new mother fainted, her mistress had her carried to her cabin and instructed another slave to finish the work. Some of the children reported what had happened to the master, who beat his wife for covering for the slave, then tied the bondwoman to a whipping pole and “beat her unmerciful.” He left the slave woman tied to the pole while he attended church, and when he returned, the woman had died. According to the informant, the master said “laziness” had killed the slave woman and that she wasn’t “worth the box she was buried in.” The babies died the next day.<sup>35</sup> Another woman reported that she suffered several broken bones at the hands of her mistress. At nine years old, she was charged with tending babies. Once, when the informant failed to wake right away to

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<sup>32</sup> Carrie Mason, interview by Estelle G. Burke, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 3, pp.112-113.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Nix, interview by Mary A. Crawford, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 3, p. 143.

<sup>34</sup> William Ward, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 4, p. 130.

<sup>35</sup> “Compilation Richmond County Ex-Slave Interviews Mistreatment of Slaves,” pp. 296-297.

respond to a baby's cries, the mistress beat the girl with an iron fireplace poker and broke the child's finger. The ex-slave said she suffered two more broken fingers as the result of other beatings. When the informant forgot to address her mistress's nine-month-old daughter as "miss," the mistress put the slave child in stocks and beat her, during which the little girl twisted and broke her leg. At other times, the source reported, if a slave addressed the master's children by their names, rather than "mistress" or "master," the adults "would strip you and let the child beat you."<sup>36</sup> In a separate interview, Charlie Pye told of an overseer who began whipping a passing slave girl who stopped to rest and talk to Pye's uncle. The uncle picked up an axe and struck a fatal blow to the overseer's head. Pye said the mistress was fond of his uncle and kept him hidden until she could send him out of the state to avoid punishment.<sup>37</sup> Pye's mother "resented being whipped" and would run away to the woods, where she sometimes stayed as long as twelve months. "When the strain of staying away from her family became too great, she would return home," Pye said. "No sooner would she arrive than the old overseer would tie her to a peach tree and whip her again."<sup>38</sup>

Georgia's ex-slaves told of bondspeople who resisted abuse, often by running away. George Eason remembered his mother receiving several whippings and then running away and hiding in the woods. When she returned to the cabin at night for food, she warned the children not to tell the master she had been there.<sup>39</sup> Isaiah Green told of a slave, Jesse, who ran away from a cruel master and lived in a cave on the master's property for seven years without the master's knowledge.<sup>40</sup> Celestia Avery's grandmother Sylvia was whipped regularly by her master, who did not like that his slave prayed every

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>37</sup> Charlie Pye, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 3, p. 186.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>39</sup> George Eason, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, p. 301.

<sup>40</sup> Isaiah Green, interview by Minnie B. Ross, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, p. 52.

morning. Once while Sylvia was pregnant, the master “whipped her so brutally that her body was raw all over.” When her husband cut her down from the tree where she was tied, Sylvia crawled on her hands and knees to the woods, where she remained until after she gave birth to twins. Sylvia, a midwife, used a pin knife to cut the babies’ umbilical cords, then wrapped the newborns in cloth from her torn petticoat.<sup>41</sup> One day while hoeing in the field, Sylvia had not completed all the work that had been tasked to her. The overseer ordered her to remove her clothes for a whipping when she reached the end of the row. As the interviewer recorded, “Grandmother continued hoeing until she came to a fence; as the overseer reached out to grab her she snatched a fence railing and broke it across his arms.”<sup>42</sup> In another incident, Sylvia ran to town to warn her master that the overseer was “beating her husband to death.” The master rode back to his plantation and ordered the overseer to cease the whipping.<sup>43</sup>

Occasionally, the interviews contain accounts of free blacks who resided in Georgia prior to the Civil War. John F. Van Hook’s great-grandmother, Sarah Angel, cared for slave children while their mothers worked. According to Van Hook, “Granny Sarah” was legally emancipated so that she could serve as wet nurse for a baby in her owner’s extended family after the child’s mother died. The family did not want Sarah living in slave quarters while she nursed the infant. In that community, Van Hook explained, there was a taboo against white children being nursed by a slave, though it was permissible for the child to be nursed by a free black woman.<sup>44</sup> An Augusta man named Eugene reported that his mother had been brought to that city as a slave from Pennsylvania and was emancipated when she reached adulthood. She married a slave whose master owned a jewelry store. The jeweler wanted his

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<sup>41</sup> Celestia Avery, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, pp. 24-25.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> John F. Van Hook, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 4, pp. 74-75.

slave's children to work for him as well and grew angry that Eugene's mother would not allow it. Though Eugene's mother had authority to oppose her husband's master regarding her children's welfare, she was also subject to the strict legal codes imposed on free blacks. She was required to appoint a white guardian for her children and was forbidden to venture outside after the nine o'clock curfew the city imposed on its free black residents.<sup>45</sup>

Georgia's ex-slaves recalled how bondspeople celebrated the news of their freedom at the end of the Civil War; but they also revealed ambivalence toward federal soldiers and their role in emancipation. W.B. Allen, the Columbus, Georgia, minister who grew up in Alabama was known by his former owners to be a religious youth. In 1865, "when the South was about whipped and General Wilson was headed our way," Allen said, the family asked him "to pray to God to hold the Yankees back." Allen, who was between fifteen and seventeen years old at the time, said he had no particular love for Yankees but refused to pray as his masters requested. As he related to his interviewer,

I told my white folks straight-from-the-shoulder that I *could not* pray along those lines. I told them flat-footedly that, while I loved them and would do any reasonable praying for them, I could not pray against my conscience: that I not only wanted to be free, but that I wanted to see all the Negroes freed! I then told them that God was using the Yankees to scourge the slaveholders just as He had, centuries before, used heathens and outcasts to chastise His chosen people—the Children of Israel.<sup>46</sup>

According to the interviewer, Allen then issued "a mild tirade against Yankees," in which he charged that bringing about emancipation was the only time Northerners had ever aided black people.<sup>47</sup>

Aside from Allen, few ex-slaves expressed such definite views of the Federal army as an instrument of slave liberation; some recalled Union soldiers delivering the message that the slaves were free, but more often, the interviews record the destruction or theft of slaveholders' property. Alice

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<sup>45</sup> Eugene, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 4, pp. 213-214.

<sup>46</sup> Rev. W.B. Allen, interview by J.R. Jones, 12.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

Green, of Athens, was only a small child when Federal soldiers rode onto her mistress's property, but she related what her mother purportedly told her about that day. The troops advised the former bondspeople that they were free, but Green reportedly expressed disapproval that they also helped themselves to the contents of the smokehouse and encouraged the slaves to take whatever they wanted from the big house and from around the plantation. According to Green, the "thievin' sojers" started to carry off a baby, which made the mistress "scream and cry."<sup>48</sup>

When Rhodus Walton and his fellow slaves heard the sound of guns from a battle near Columbus, the bondspeople "cried joyfully — 'It ain't gonna be long now.'" Anticipating the arrival of Union troops, Walton's master had the slaves dig graves in the cemetery, where they buried "all manner of food," to prevent it from being carried off by the soldiers. For three days, Walton's owner kept his house slaves busy "preparing delicacies" in an attempt to placate the soldiers and "avoid having their place destroyed." The soldiers, however, made a point of finding out in advance if a master had been "mean or kind and always treated him as he had treated his slaves." According to Walton, the soldiers destroyed nearly everything on his master's property.<sup>49</sup>

Like Mose Davis, who remembered his father "rushing into their cabin waving his arms like a windmill" to announce the news of freedom, ex-slaves recalled their jubilation at being free, but many found their former masters unwilling to accept the change of circumstances. After emancipation, Davis traveled for a while and returned to his old plantation to discover his father had died. When the landowner refused to give Davis the ox that belonged to his father, Davis returned later that night and took the animal.<sup>50</sup> Tom Hawkins, of Augusta, recalled that one of his fellow slaves was washing clothes by a spring when she received the news of freedom and shouted, "'Thank God-a-Moughty I'se

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<sup>48</sup> Alice Green, interview by Corry Fowler, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Rhodus Walton, interview by Adella S. Dixon, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 4, p. 126.

<sup>50</sup> Mose Davis, interview by E. Driskell, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, p. 271.

free at last!” When their former master heard her exclamation, he struck the woman to keep her silent and waited several months to make the announcement. Soon afterward, Federal soldiers passed by the property. “I never will forgit how bad dem yankees treated Old Miss,” Hawkins said. “Dey stole all her good hosses, and her chickens and dey broke in de smokehouse and tuk her meat. Dey went in de big house and tuk her nice quilts and blankets. She stood all of dat wid a straight face but when dey foun’ her gold, she just broke down and cried and cried.” Several of the former slaves accepted the soldiers’ invitation to leave with them, but Hawkins stayed and continued to work as a house servant until his mistress died; he was twenty-one years old at the time.<sup>51</sup> George Eason was illegally held in bondage long after the war. When the family who owned him moved to Atlanta in 1867, he was forced to move with them and was not allowed to “go or stay as he pleased” until most of the family died.<sup>52</sup> G.W. Pattillo affirmed that some planters “kept their slaves in ignorance of their freedom,” but Pattillo’s master called his former slaves together, informed them they were free, and told them they could remain on the plantation if they wanted to stay and “[share] everything we raise equally.”<sup>53</sup> Annie Huff’s master was not so forthcoming. Though he refused to tell his former slaves that they were free, they learned the news from ex-bondspeople on neighboring plantations. Huff’s former mistress assembled the children and told them that even though they were legally free, they were required to stay with her until they turned twenty-one. Annie’s daughter Mary defied the deceitful woman and declared, “I’m free! I won’t stay here at all!”<sup>54</sup>

Ex-slaves also recalled the white supremacist violence of the postwar years. Willis Coffey’s father was beaten by members of the Ku Klux Klan for being out after dark. “When dey turned him

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<sup>51</sup> Tom Hawkins, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, p. 133.

<sup>52</sup> George Eason, interview by E. Driskell, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, p. 304.

<sup>53</sup> G.W. Pattillo, interview by Minnie B. Ross, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 3, p. 170.

<sup>54</sup> Annie Huff, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, pp. 236-237.

loose, he couldn't hardly stand up," Cofer told his interviewer.<sup>55</sup> Anderson Furr and his family received a visit from a Klansman who "set [sic] down and talked to us 'bout how us ought to act, and how us was goin' to have to do, if us 'spected to live and do well." Furr's family suspected that the man, who wore a white robe and hood and tried to disguise his voice, was really their old master.<sup>56</sup> Isaiah Green's uncle was one of several black people who found bags of money concealed in an abandoned mail wagon that had broken down in the middle of a creek. When the Klan discovered he was one of the people who had taken the money, they kidnapped Green's uncle and "carried him to the woods where they pinned him to the ground, set the dry leaves on fire, and left him." The uncle suffered serious burns on his feet, but not all the leaves ignited, and he managed to work himself loose from his restraints. The uncle then reported to his former master that he had recognized the man's son among those who had left him to be burned alive. The former master offered money in exchange for not exposing the son and sought medical treatment for Green's uncle, who had to have all of his toes amputated.<sup>57</sup> When he was a child, John Hill said, he accompanied a group of Klansmen who terrorized an old man. As they bound his hands and suspended him from the rafters in his house, the man begged to be let go and pleaded for mercy. Hill tried to frighten a little girl who was in the house, but she used a shovel to make a gash in his leg, from which Hill took six months to recover.<sup>58</sup>

Interview subjects reported opposition to slave literacy and education. Charlie Hudson's former master had been persuaded to allow school sessions for slaves to be held in his ginhouse on Sunday mornings. On the fourth Sunday, Hudson and his fellow students arrived to find that "night riders had done made a shape lak a coffin in de sand out in front, and painted a sign on de ginhouse what read:

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<sup>55</sup> Willis Cofer, interview by Grace McCune, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, p. 210.

<sup>56</sup> Anderson Furr, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, p. 351.

<sup>57</sup> Isaiah Green, interview by Minnie B. Ross, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, pp. 53-54.

<sup>58</sup> John Hill, interview by Grace McCune, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, pp. 203-204.

‘No Niggers ‘lowed to be taught in dis ginhouse.’” Hudson’s former owner then built a brush arbor to be used as the site of a school, but when the students arrived, they found that the arbor had been destroyed.<sup>59</sup> Henry Nix praised his former owner as a good master, but when the FWP interviewer asked if the master had taught his slaves to read and write, Nix related the story of an uncle who stole a book in an attempt to teach himself to read. To make an example of him to the other slaves, Nix’s master had the uncle’s finger amputated.<sup>60</sup> Ferebe Rogers similarly reported that the penalty for a slave who was known to be able to read and write was to have an arm cut off at the elbow or shoulder.<sup>61</sup> Mose Davis’s cousin demonstrated how slave literacy could challenge the master’s authority when he forged a check and withdrew money from his master’s bank account. When the scheme was discovered, the cousin was “given a sound whipping and assigned to hard labor by the master.”<sup>62</sup> Alice Green’s mother acquired her education by questioning the white children about the day’s lessons when they returned from school. By this method, Green’s mother learned to read and write. Green recalled her mother being “so proud of evvy little scrap of book larnin’ she could pick up.”<sup>63</sup> After emancipation, Minnie Davis attended Knox Institute and Atlanta University and taught school in Athens for forty years. Her husband, Samuel, published a newspaper, a job Davis briefly assumed after Samuel’s death. When asked her opinion of major political leaders, Minnie Davis said, “I often think of Abraham Lincoln; he did a good deed for my race. Jeff Davis was a good man and, no doubt, he thought he was doing the right thing. Booker T. Washington was a man of brilliant mind, but he was

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<sup>59</sup> Charlie Hudson, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 2, p. 226.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Nix, interview by Mary A. Crawford, pp. 143-144.

<sup>61</sup> Ferebe Rogers, interview, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives Georgia Part 3, p. 215.

<sup>62</sup> Mose Davis, interview by E. Driskell, 270.

<sup>63</sup> Alice Green, interview by Corry Fowler, 33-34.



radically wrong in many of his views pertaining to education of the black race.”<sup>64</sup>

After the work of collecting ex-slave testimony came to an end, folklorist B.A. Botkin supervised the organization of more than 2,300 interviews into seventeen volumes to be deposited in the Library of Congress. Botkin was also tasked with preparing a selection of interviews for publication. *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* was published in late 1945. The aim of the book was to reflect “the flavor of the entire collection and the social patterns revealed in the series” while appealing to a broad general readership.<sup>65</sup> Much of *Lay My Burden Down* consists of interview excerpts, loosely organized by theme. Part I, “Mother Wit” consists primarily of folklore. Part II “Long Remembrance,” consists of fifteen interviews printed in their entirety. The remaining three sections record experiences of slave life, recollections of the Civil War, and informants’ reflections on freedom and their post-emancipation experience. At approximately three hundred pages, *Lay My Burden Down* represents only a small portion of the more than ten thousand manuscript pages included in the *Slave Narratives* collection. As Botkin acknowledges in his preface, the volume was intended more for popular consumption than scholarly research.<sup>66</sup> Not until the 1970s would the complete *Slave Narratives* collection become widely available as *The American Slave* series edited by George Rawick. Yet in 1945, even with its comparatively small selection of interviews, reviewers saw *Lay My Burden Down* as a groundbreaking work in the literature of slavery. Ben Burns, of *The Chicago Defender*, lauded the collection as “the best book ever written for an insight into the heart and soul of those Americans who once were shackled under American barbarism.” Praising the book for resisting negative black stereotypes, Burns wrote that *Lay My Burden Down* “pioneers in showing slaves as

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<sup>64</sup> Minnie Davis, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, *Slave Narratives*, vol. IV Georgia Narratives, Part 1, pp. 262-263.

<sup>65</sup> B.A. Botkin, preface to *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, ed. B.A. Botkin (1945; repr., New York: Dell Publishing, 1994), xxxiii.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

intelligent, alert, wise fighters for freedom.”<sup>67</sup> Lloyd Lewis, of the *New York Times*, found in the book “much of ‘Uncle Remus,’ more of ‘Uncle Tom,’ and still more of a particular blend of poetry and bitterness which has never before been drawn so comprehensively” from elderly ex-slaves.<sup>68</sup> Sterling Brown, who served as editor of Negro Affairs for the Federal Writer’s Project, had planned to use the ex-slave interviews as source material for a book of African American history called *The Portrait of the Negro as American* but left his position at the FWP before the project could be realized.<sup>69</sup> In his review for the *Nation*, Brown praised both the photographs of ex-slaves included in *Lay My Burden Down* and the text, which, he wrote, “helps to restore human dignity to people whose history was nearly ruined by sentimentality and condescension and downright lying.”<sup>70</sup>

Nearly a decade had passed between the initiation of interviews by the Federal Writer’s Project and the publication of *Lay My Burden Down*. In that time, the United States had fought and emerged victorious from World War II. In the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, sociologist Horace Cayton began his review by calling *Lay My Burden Down* a “good companion piece” to news coverage from Nuremberg, where the trials of Nazi war criminals had begun a few weeks earlier. Botkin’s volume, Cayton wrote, “shows how a nation can rationalize man’s injustice to man” and “how the practice of reducing man to the status of beasts of burden can be institutionalized and accepted in the moral code of a nation.” Cayton acknowledged that the book lacked “sharp focus” and “organization” yet asserted that *Lay My Burden Down* made it “impossible” to sustain the plantation myth of slavery. In Cayton’s estimation,

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<sup>67</sup> Ben Burns, “Off the Book Shelf: The Slavery Epoch,” review of *Lay My Burden Down*, *Chicago Defender*, December 1, 1945, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender.

<sup>68</sup> Lloyd Lewis, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin as It Really Was,” review of *Lay My Burden Down*, *New York Times*, January 6, 1946.

<sup>69</sup> Joanne V. Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition* (1985; repr., Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1994); 79-80.

<sup>70</sup> Sterling Brown, “By the Rivers of Babylon,” review of *Lay My Burden Down*, *Nation*, May 11, 1946, 575.

“every page contains a gem of understated emotion or a flashing insight of what the slave system did to corrupt the dignity of both Negro and white men.”<sup>71</sup>

### **“A Mirror of All the Manifold Experiences of America”: Slavery in *12 Million Black Voices***

At the same time the Federal Writer’s Project recorded the oral histories of former slaves, photographers for another federal agency, the Farm Security Administration, crisscrossed the country documenting the lives of rural workers. In 1941, Viking Press published a selection of those photographs with a text written by Richard Wright. Wright, who had been employed by the FWP but not on the *Slave Narrative* project, had achieved international literary fame with the critically acclaimed bestseller *Native Son*. Written by an African American from the perspective of African Americans, Wright’s commentary for the photo documentary *12 Million Black Voices* challenged white Southerner’s virtual monopoly on representations of the slave past. In *Voices*, Wright also develops historical interpretations that reemerge in his autobiography, first published in 1944. In both texts, Wright politicizes food and hunger, represents language and literacy as instruments of power, and searches for the origins of American racism in the story of that nation’s enslaved past. As he writes that story from the perspective of slaves and their descendants, he is ever cognizant of narrating a commonly held experience. His terminology does not correspond exactly to that of the current scholarship, but the underlying principle is unmistakable: Wright, who read widely in psychology and sociology, demonstrated a deep concern for cultural memory. Both in his published works and interviews, Wright professed a desire that his writing should speak for the masses. He declared that he

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<sup>71</sup> Horace Cayton, “Penetrating Study of Slavery in U.S.: Botkin Bares Injustices of Another Day,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 9, 1945.

wrote his autobiography to “lend...my tongue, to voiceless Negro boys.”<sup>72</sup> While Wright repeatedly characterizes the position of African Americans in the mid-twentieth century as a form of bondage, he also understands the racial injustices of his time to be the result of a historical process that began with the introduction of chattel slavery.

Spanning more than three hundred years, *12 Million Black Voices* relates the shared history of African Americans, from the transatlantic slave trade to the Great Migration. Wright’s narrative recounts generations of chattel bondage, emancipation, virtual re-enslavement through sharecropping, and the exploitation that greeted black migrants in northern cities. While writing as a historian, Wright narrates in the first-person plural and frames his narrative as a collective biography. Writing of “we,” “our,” and “us,” he emphasizes the experience as a communal one, shared by multiple generations. When he writes of the Dutch ship that anchored at Jamestown in 1619, Wright tells of it delivering, not slaves, but a “human cargo of 20 of *us*.” According to Wright, the arrival inaugurated what would become “*our* trial for centuries to come” [emphasis mine].<sup>73</sup> Referring to the Dutch craft as the “nameless sister ship” of the *Mayflower*, Wright asserts the sale of black bondspeople as an alternate story of national origins, a counterpoint to the popular tale of English colonists’ quest for religious freedom.

The photographs that compose *12 Million Black Voices* were taken during the Great Depression, but Wright begins his narrative with the introduction of chattel slavery in the North America. In his account of colonization, “the lowly of England and Europe...pushed out to the sea to urge rebellion against tyranny and then straightaway became engaged in the slave trade” (*12MBV*, 12). After the Revolution, when it was apparent that slavery violated the core principals of the new nation,

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<sup>72</sup> “How Richard Wright Looks at *Black Boy*,” in *Conversations with Richard Wright*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 65.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941; repr., New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002), 14. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *12MBV*.

Southern slaveholders, Wright explains, “relaxed their rigid slave code” just enough to “square their guilty conscience with the lofty ideals of the rights of man for which they had fought and died” (12MBV, 12). Notably attributing colonial era slave traffic to New Englanders, Wright belies the common notion that slavery was localized in the South. He writes of sexual exploitation, which began on slave ships and became a “well established institution,” primarily responsible for the “mulatto” population in the United States. He describes how sometimes more than seven hundred people would be packed virtually on top of each other in a space 120' x 20' x 5', where they would lie “tortured and gasping, as the ship heaved and tossed over the waves” on voyages that lasted eight to ten weeks (12MBV, 14).

By Wright’s account, the horrors of the Middle Passage obliterated the native cultures of the enslaved. Historian Stanley Elkins would reprise this highly controversial assertion in his study *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. Not until 1972 in *The Slave Community*, would historian John Blassingame revise this understanding of slave life by demonstrating that slaves shared a culture based on language and traditions that survived from native African countries. Though the loss of African culture would later be refuted, Wright also adopts the language of psychoanalysis to define the kidnapping, enslavement, and lifelong bondage of African Americans as a collective trauma (12MBV, 15). Wright attributes to African Americans as a social group the same difficulty individual survivors of trauma often have narrating their experience. Of the people he calls “inheritors of slavery,” Wright speculates that “perhaps scores of years will have to pass before we shall be able to express what this slavery has done to us” (12MBV, 29, 31).

In the second chapter of *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright narrates the post-emancipation period. While he correctly suggests gender as a primary factor in the experience of freedpeople, Wright is uncharacteristically deceived by the popular myth of white slaveholders’ affection for the black nurses. He does not recognize the “Mammy” myth either as a fiction of white paternalism or as a black

stereotype. He incorrectly asserts that aged “Mammies” enjoyed a privileged status and were cared for by their former owner-charges after emancipation. Wright spuriously claims, “Our women fared easier than we men during the early days of freedom.” He also inexplicably genders cotton, for all its brutality, as female (*12MBV*, 36, 38). Most significant, however, is Wright’s characterization of the labor system that developed after the Civil War. Sharecropping, Wright explains, was “a new kind of bondage” (*12MBV*, 36).

In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright renders the master-slave relationship in terms of food and develops arguments he will eventually place at the center of *Black Boy/American Hunger*. According to Wright, U.S. slaves—men and women held as legal chattel but presumably also those pressed into the virtual bondage of sharecropping—worked like slaves of antiquity “to supply delicacies for the [master’s] tables.” What made this, according to Wright, the “harshest form of human servitude the world has ever known” was the cash crop cotton (*12MBV*, 38). As Wright explains the conversion of cotton to money and, in turn, money to power, he measures the extent of that power in food stores: “To plant vegetables for our tables was often forbidden...for raising a garden narrowed the area to be planted in cotton” (*12MBV*, 49).

The narrative of *12 Million Black Voices* underscores language and literacy as currencies of power. Wright recounts, for instance, how masters dispersed the first generation of saltwater slaves. To keep them from plotting resistance, no two people who spoke the same language were placed together. The effect, Wright explains, was that, “Our eyes would look wistfully into the face of a fellow victim of slavery, but we could say no word to him. Though we could hear, we were deaf, though we could speak, we were dumb” (*12MBV*, 40). Of literacy, he writes, “the people who say how the world is to be run, who have fires in winter, who wear warm clothes, *who get enough to eat* [emphasis mine] are the people who make books speak to them” (*12MBV*, 64). In *Black Boy*, the central theme of hunger is inextricable from Wright’s treatment of literacy and the story of his self-making.

In the third chapter of *Voices*, the author evokes visions of train rides north and collective “complex sensations” stirred by the sight of the Ohio River, which, according to Wright, is more than a watercourse: “It is a symbol, a line that runs through our hearts, dividing hope from despair, just as once it bisected the nation, dividing freedom from slavery” (12MBV, 98). As the northern border of Kentucky, the Ohio River provided a natural boundary between that slave state and the free states of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. In his 1849 narrative, Henry Bibb, who had been born a slave in Kentucky, recalled looking across the banks of the Ohio and longing for the freedom of its opposite shore. Modeled after Frederick Douglass’s famous apostrophe on the Chesapeake, Bibb’s passage suggests a geographical orientation for freedom. Much as it would for later generations of African Americans whose experience Wright narrates, hope for the slave lay across the river and north.<sup>74</sup>

Between 1915 and 1970, nearly six million black Southerners journeyed to cities north and west in what came to be known as the Great Migration. The largest mass population movement in the history of the United States, the Great Migration involved at least four generations of African Americans and happened without any formal organization or leadership.<sup>75</sup> The migrants traveled in search of opportunities to create better lives for themselves than what was possible under Jim Crow. Wright participated in the migration when he traveled to Chicago in 1927, but with the conditions he and other migrants encountered, their destinations proved less than the hoped-for Promised Land.

Wright’s novel *Native Son* shows its ill-fated central character to be the product of an environment that impeded any opportunity to which the black youth might have aspired. The accidental murder of his white employer’s daughter, his brutal acts to cover up the crime and evade capture, and, ultimately, his death sentence are verdicts on the racist society that denied Bigger Thomas the slightest

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<sup>74</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, 1849, Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 8-11.

shred of humanity. *Native Son* also shows a gross disparity in how the legal system seeks justice for black and white crime victims. Chicago police wage a manhunt for the killer of the white heiress but take no notice of the second, deliberate murder of Thomas's black ex-girlfriend.<sup>76</sup>

*Native Son* opens with Thomas, his mother, and two siblings doing battle with a giant rat in their cramped, one-room flat; in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright identifies this dwelling, the “kitchenette” as the basic unit of urban oppression for African Americans who migrated to northern cities. Much like the media representation of southern sharecropping as “charming, idyllic, [and] romantic” the term kitchenette—literally a small kitchen—with its connotation of domestic efficiency, obscures the exploitative reality of urban housing for black residents (*12MBV*, 35). Landlords converted dilapidated houses to squalid tenements by installing a small gas stove and sink in each one-room unit that they rented to black tenants at exorbitant weekly rates. As many as five or six occupants crowded into a single kitchenette. Thirty or more residents shared a single bathroom. The lack of sanitation made these tenements a breeding ground for communicable diseases (*12MBV*, 107). Malnutrition was also rampant in the kitchenette, which Wright describes as “our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence” (*12MBV*, 107). As it “throws desperate and unhappy people into an unbearable closeness of association” Wright’s portrait of the kitchenette echoes his description of slave ships. In Chicago, as in other cities, white property owners uniformly refused to sell or rent to black residents beyond the accepted boundaries of the city’s Black Belt, making it virtually impossible for residents to relocate. The “mountains of profits” reaped by slum lords suggest these housing ghettos as the urban counterpart to that “new kind of bondage: sharecropping” (*12MBV*, 36).

In *Voices*, Wright equates hunger with political disempowerment and rehearses what will become the central political theme of his autobiography. Writing of the dirty and physically demanding

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940; repr., New York: Perennial, 2003).



jobs to which black laborers are relegated, he explains, “Our choice is between eating and starving, and we choose to eat” (*12MBV*, 118). As bosses hire black workers to break the strikes of white workers in order to maintain their exploitative labor practices, Wright explains the dilemma of black laborers who are “hungry and eager to work” but who do not want to usurp the jobs of the strikers: “we do not want to snatch food from the tables of poor white children, for we of all people know how hungry children can be” (*12MBV*, 118). Yet as black workers take these jobs out of necessity and work for “daily bread,” Wright explains, white workers view them with malice, are “emphatic in drawing the color line,” and refuse to admit African Americans to labor unions. Later, as he discusses the corrupt political machine of the city and its ties to organized crime, Wright once again renders political disempowerment in the language of hunger, as he explains, “We are caught in a tangle of conflicting ideals; we must either swap our votes for bread or starve” (*12MBV*, 122).

By Wright’s account, the constant threat of racial violence, the search for employment and the struggle for basic subsistence, make life for African Americans, North and South, a kind of “daily warfare.” With an extended metaphor that figures black skins as uniforms that divide African Americans from the implicitly white “civilian population,” Wright characterizes black men and women as combat soldiers, their kitchenettes as barracks, and their daily lives as a perpetual battle in which they achieve few victories (*12MBV*, 123). This characterization reprises an earlier discussion of African American military service in World War I, a subject to which Wright returns in *Black Boy*. In *Voices*, Wright recounts the U.S. army’s segregation of black troops into labor battalions “even when they were fighting and dying” (*12MBV*, 88). After participating in battle and witnessing the deaths of “men of all races and nations,” black veterans, Wright explains, returned with “quick steps and proud shoulders.” Emphasizing the betrayal of citizen soldiers, he records how white supremacists responded to this confidence by lynching black veterans while they “still [wore] the uniform of the United States Army” (*12MBV*, 88).

In the fourth and final chapter, which he titles “Men in the Making,” Wright arrives at a final meditation on African American identity and its relation to U.S. national identity. According to Wright, “We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America *is*. If we black folk perish, America will perish.” Writing from the perspective of a people who have been excluded and alienated by their country, Wright asserts the centrality of African American experience to the identity of the nation. Much as he casts the first slave ship as the *Mayflower*’s “nameless sister ship,” Wright challenges the dominant white ethnocentric narrative with the collective memory of African Americans. “If America has forgotten her past,” he writes, “then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the *living* past living in the present, for our memories go back, through our black folk of today, through the recollections of our black parents, and through the tales of slavery told by our black grandparents, to the time when none of us, black or white, lived in this fertile land (*12MBV*, 146).

In the conclusion of *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright defines progress as the “upward march of American life” and as a “procession” that African Americans have joined. In *Black Boy*, Wright transforms this figurative language of parades into a literal account of black soldiers on the march. Less than a month after the publication of *12 Million Black Voices*, the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese navy, prompting U.S. military entry into World II. Though *Black Boy/American Hunger* ends well before the Second World War, Wright’s indictment of American racism is significantly concerned with the country’s conduct toward its black veterans.

### **Slavery, Black Military Service, and the Politics of Hunger**

In its original form, Wright’s autobiography consisted of two parts. The first concludes with

Wright preparing to depart for Chicago and presumably a freer existence than the one afforded by the Jim Crow South. The second, a stark account of racial hypocrisy in a supposedly “free” North, closes with a scene of the aspiring author writing in his Chicago apartment, where he resolves to use literature as an instrument of social change. Published in March 1945, *Black Boy* topped bestseller lists from April 29 to June 6 of that year.<sup>77</sup> Its commercial success was due in part to its selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club, which agreed to market the book to its subscribers on the condition that the published text end with Wright’s departure from the South. Excerpts of the manuscript’s excised second half appeared in national magazines and literary anthologies, but removed from the narrative context of *Black Boy* and subjected to additional editing, these articles likewise altered Wright’s original meaning. The full second half of Wright’s manuscript was only published posthumously in 1977 under the title *American Hunger*. The autobiography was not restored to its complete, original text until 1991, when the Library of America published both *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* in a single volume. For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to consider these texts together, as the single, unified narrative of Wright’s original manuscript and individually for what their separate publications reveal. The portion of the text that the Book-of-the-Month Club excluded was highly critical of social conditions in Chicago, just as *Black Boy* had denounced the author’s experience in Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee. As the first truncated editions of Wright’s book limited his story to the Deep South, they reinforced the myth of race prejudice as a regional problem and thus absolved the rest of the country of the racism that Wright experienced as a national phenomenon.<sup>78</sup> Perpetrating a kind of textual dismemberment, the initial publication essentially reenacted the linguistic violence that is so often repeated in *Black Boy* and in the admonitions of Wright’s family to “shut up” and “keep quiet.”

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<sup>77</sup> Chronology in Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth*, 1st Perennial Classics ed. (1945; 1977; repr., New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 398.

<sup>78</sup> Jeff Karem, “‘I could Never really Leave the South’: Regionalism and the Transformation of Richard Wright’s ‘American Hunger,’” *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (Winter, 2001): 696, 704, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3054592>.

In *Black Boy*, the lives of Wright's grandparents in slavery, the Civil War military service of his grandfather, and the unspoken social customs of a racially bifurcated South are among the topics Wright's elders either refuse to discuss or only talk about reluctantly. Decades later in *Jubilee*, Margaret Walker would novelize her great-great mother's experience during and after slavery, based on stories Walker's grandmother had told her as a child. Alex Haley would conceive his book *Roots* from the family history he heard repeated in the conversations of elder relatives. These narratives would celebrate African American oral traditions as the primary inspiration for their authors. By contrast, Wright's autobiography represents a tradition of suppressed voices and forced silences. Communication in Wright's family consists primarily of injunctions like "shut up" and "keep quiet" paired with physical assaults, a combination of physical and linguistic violence that Wright finds replicated throughout the South and the country as a whole.

The chattel slavery that the Federal Writer's project documented in the *Slave Narratives* collection was also the bondage of Wright's grandparents. Though he only writes about his mother's parents, both of Wright's grandfathers were field laborers who fled their bondage during the Civil War and joined the Union service.<sup>79</sup> Wright's maternal grandmother was a house slave.<sup>80</sup> *Black Boy* refers to the Wilsons' former enslavement exactly twice. When Wright's narrated self tries to learn more, he encounters opposition from his relatives. Their unwillingness to discuss the slave past or the racial politics of the South anticipates the wider cultural proscriptions with which Wright must later contend. According to the author, the list of topics that African Americans could not discuss with whites included "the entire northern part of the United States; the Civil War; Abraham Lincoln; U.S. Grant; General Sherman...the Republican party; slavery; social equality...the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution; or any topics calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of

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<sup>79</sup> On Wright's paternal grandfather, see Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Holt, 2002), 4.

<sup>80</sup> Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: Morrow, 1973), 3.

the Negro.”<sup>81</sup> Wright’s autobiography is not an account of slavery in the sense of novels like Walker’s or Haley’s, where chattel slavery exists in the narrative present; nor is *Black Boy/American Hunger* a Civil War battle narrative in the tradition of *The Red Badge of Courage*, which Wright read shortly after reaching Chicago. In its complete form, as it applies to slavery and the Civil War, Wright’s narrative is a story about cultural memory. It is a multigenerational tale that evokes the slavery of the previous century to characterize the effects of American racism in the 1920s and 30s. It links the experience of Wright’s grandparents with the author’s own, primarily through efforts of Wright’s younger self to learn his family history and comprehend the debilitating environment in which he comes of age. The constant opposition Wright encounters suggests a larger problem of historical transmission. Just as African Americans were excluded from the body politic in the nation of Wright’s youth, the most popular stories of the national past either omitted the experience of black Americans altogether or romanticized it from the point of view of the enslavers and exploiters of black labor, as in *Gone With the Wind*. Not only does Wright’s oeuvre assert a counternarrative to the version of slavery represented in Mitchell’s novel and its film adaptation, the centrality of food and hunger in Wright’s text significantly reimagines the politics of race and hunger represented by the slave garden scene of *GWTW* and Scarlett O’Hara’s famous vow never to go hungry again.

As told in *Black Boy/American Hunger*, the defining experience of life for Richard Wright was hunger. Want of food was the chronic affliction of the author’s youth. He first experienced the extremes of hunger when his father abandoned their family for another woman. Deserted by the family’s primary wage earner, six-year-old Wright was seized by a physical hunger more severe than any he had ever known. All his mother could offer in the form of relief was a cup of tea, and it wasn’t long before Wright again felt “hunger nudging my ribs, twisting my empty guts until they ached”

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<sup>81</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth*, 1st Perennial Classics ed. (1945; 1977; repr., New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 231. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *BB/AH*.

(*BB/AH*, 14-15). The author eventually expands the meaning of hunger to encompass both physical and metaphysical appetites. In his study of food in African American literature, Andrew Warnes explains hunger as the “thematic umbrella” under which Wright expresses multiple desires “for education, enlightenment, and political reform.”<sup>82</sup> In *Black Boy*, Wright’s argument unfolds in relation to various government agencies and public institutions. The orphanage to which his mother temporarily relinquished custody of Wright and his brother is the subject of extended analysis by Warnes. Perhaps even more significant is the court ruling on Ella Wilson Wright’s petition for child support. The author recalls the white face of the judge looking down from his bench as his mother explains that “her children were hungry, [and] that they stayed hungry” (*BB/AH*, 27). The judge, Wright implies, simply takes the word of the father who claims to be doing all he can, which is, in fact, nothing. That paternal effort is duplicated by the judge, who refuses to compel Nathan Wright to feed his children. The failed justice system that Wright first represents in the towering white face of the judge is later represented by black prisoners on a chain gang—what Wright casts as a veritable slavery and the epitome of African American life in the South.

As Richard Wright transforms the physical hunger of his youth into a symbol of social and political disempowerment, he conveys his abject social position through scenes like the one that occurs in the kitchen of his mother’s employer. Just when the new and confusing hunger overwhelms six-year-old Richard, his mother takes a job as a cook. While Ella Wilson Wright prepares the edible bounty of another family, her wages afford only a scant diet of bread and tea for her sons. Sometimes the children accompany their mother to work, where the boys receive “occasional scraps of bread and meat,” depending on what, if anything, remains after the white employers have their fill (*BB/AH*, 19). As the white family eat, laugh, and talk around a “loaded table,” the black child stands “hungrily and silently”

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<sup>82</sup> Andrew Warnes, *Hunger Overcome?: Food and Resistance in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 82.

in the corner of their kitchen, where, Wright recalls, “my nostrils would be assailed with the scent of food that did not belong to me and which I was forbidden to eat” (*BB/AH*, 19). Collapsing social alienation, voicelessness, and yearning into a single scene of bodily hunger, Wright enacts the food disparity that he similarly associates with chattel slavery in *12 Million Black Voices*. After his mother becomes too ill to work, a slightly older Richard earns twenty-five cents a week delivering food to roundhouse workers. “When the men did not finish their lunches,” the author recalls, “I salvaged what few crumbs remained” (*BB/AH*, 84). In both scenes, what would otherwise be discarded as refuse becomes a comestible boon to the famished child.

W.E.B. Du Bois, who endorsed *12 Million Black Voices*, began his review of *Black Boy* by questioning “just exactly what its relation to truth is.” He objected to the self-absorption and lack of sympathy in the central character, who he supposed may have been Wright or some fictional creation.<sup>83</sup> As Du Bois correctly discerned, *Black Boy* did not relate the entirety of Wright’s childhood. Some elements, the author chose to recast; others he simply excluded. As biographer Michel Fabre explains, Wright, as the author of *Black Boy* “wanted to see himself as a child of the proletariat.”<sup>84</sup> At the end of the Civil War, for instance, the paternal grandfather Wright never mentions was one of few ex-slaves who received a land grant from the military government, a plot he had worked as a slave and managed to retain despite some neighbors’ efforts to dispossess him of his property.<sup>85</sup> Though this omission may have been the result of Wright’s estrangement from his father, other inconsistencies abound. Wright’s maternal grandmother—Granny of the narrative—had trained as a nurse midwife; she and her husband were highly esteemed in their community, and their nine children received enough education to choose

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<sup>83</sup> W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Richard Wright Looks Back,” in *Richard Wright: The Critical Reception*, ed. John M. Reilley (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1978), 132.

<sup>84</sup> Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 6.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

skilled professions.<sup>86</sup> Wright's mother, Ella, had been a school teacher when she met and married Nathan Wright, though *Black Boy* omits this professional background and represents her as a cook.<sup>87</sup> In *Black Boy*, Wright makes his maternal grandfather a veteran of the U.S. army; in reality, Richard Wilson served a little more than three months in the Union navy.<sup>88</sup> *Black Boy* recounts a childhood in which the protagonist is extremely isolated not only from whites but also from other African Americans. In reality, Wright enjoyed greater fellowship with his classmates than his narrative suggests and had for some of his playmates the children of college faculty.<sup>89</sup> As Timothy Adams explains, Wright had both "a history of over-emphasizing the negative aspects of his early life" and a tendency to "underplay his own family's middle-class ways and more positive values."<sup>90</sup> Though Wright does not always render a complete and accurate account of his own life, *Black Boy* is, according to Adams, "an especially truthful account of black experience in America."<sup>91</sup> More than a strict account to the facts of his own life, Wright was concerned with writing the collective experience of otherwise voiceless black youth.<sup>92</sup> "An autobiography" Wright said, "is the story of one's life, but if one wants to, one can make it more than that and I definitely had that in mind when I wrote the book." His goal, he explained, "was to render judgment on my environment...the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 6; Timothy Dow Adams, "Wearing the Mask," in *Richard Wright's Black Boy (American Hunger): A Casebook*, eds. William L. Andrews and Douglas Edward Taylor (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 175.

<sup>88</sup> Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 2.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 22; Adams, "Wearing the Mask," 175.

<sup>90</sup> Adams, "Wearing the Mask," 173, 175.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>92</sup> John O. Hodges, "An Apprenticeship to Life and Art: Narrative Design in Wright's *Black Boy*," in Andrews and Taylor, *Richard Wright's Black Boy (American Hunger): A Casebook*, 114.



Wright repeatedly characterizes life in the South as a form of unfreedom and associates his experience with the former bondage of his grandparents. As a teenager, Wright resolved to leave the South, but the menial jobs he held after graduating high school were so short-lived, he could save no money to finance his trip. The problem of long-term employment persisted, Wright suggests, because he could not perform the role of racial subaltern. “I could not,” he writes, “make subservience an automatic part of my behavior. I had to feel and think out each tiny item of racial experience in the light of the whole race problem...I could not react as the world in which I lived expected me to” (*BB/AH*, 196). Feeling himself under constant surveillance, Wright struggled to decipher the baffling signs of each social encounter and deliberated over his every response. These were necessary steps for Wright’s own safety but also resulted in a debilitating self-consciousness. His physical deprivation was compounded by this acute psychological stress, which Wright’s narrated self aptly characterizes after a former classmate rebukes him for failing to show servility to white passersby. “Oh, Christ,” Richard says, “I can’t be a slave” (*BB/AH*, 184). As in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright evokes slavery to explain social conditions in the United States. Despite the absence of the property relation that defined his grandparents’ enslavement, Wright highlights the similarities in the psychological experience of social and political exclusion. In a 1940 interview, he said of his novel *Native Son*, “It is an accusation against the society of the United States and a defense of the Negro people, who still live in conditions very similar to slavery.”<sup>94</sup>

In *Black Boy*, Wright casts the chain gang as both a modern form of slavery and a metaphor for life as a young black man in the South. As a child playing outside alone, young Richard spies a chain gang. He first mistakes the group for a “herd of elephants,” then notes “two lines of creatures that

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<sup>93</sup> “How Richard Wright Looks at Black Boy,” in Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 64-65.

<sup>94</sup> “A Conversation with Richard Wright, Author of *Native Son*,” in Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 32.

looked like men.” Among them, the black faces vastly outnumber the white. In the child’s reasoning, the garments they wear settle the question of identity. The “ordinary” attire of the white men prompts Richard to designate them linguistically as men, while the strange, striped clothing of the black men—the stigmatizing uniform of the convict—marks them as other. Describing them alternately as “elephants,” “black creatures,” and “strange animals,” the author suggests a brutalized condition that eventually encapsulates his own experience of feeling like a “non-man, something that knew vaguely that it was human but felt that it was not” (*BB/AH*, 57, 194). The brutalization of the chain gain is further evidenced by the sublingual “grunting” which serves as the prisoner’s only oral communication. When young Richard whispers to one man, “What are you doing?” the prisoner’s only response is to shake his head, “cast his eyes guardedly back at the white man” and continue to dig. The self-imposed silence and the fear implied in the prisoner’s backward glance are more explicable when Richard notices that the whites carry guns (*BB/AH*, 57). The repression of speech, not only by the man Richard approaches but by all of the prisoners who work in silence, is replicated in the suppression of Wright’s voice throughout the first half of the narrative by blows from his adult relatives and later by the fear that a word, a look, a mannerism will provoke a deadly reprisal. The scene also recalls from *12 Million Black Voices* the account of saltwater slaves whose lack of a common language left them unable to exchange more than a sympathetic glance with their fellow bondspeople.

When Richard reports the encounter to his mother, she explains that the men are not elephants but “a gang of men chained together and made to work...[b]ecause they’ve done something wrong and they’re being punished” (*BB/AH*, 58). The stripes on their clothing, intended to keep them from running away, signify that the men are convicts. The white men do not wear stripes because they are guards. “Do white men ever wear stripes?” Richard asks. “Sometimes.” Has his mother ever seen any? “No.” “Why do so many black men wear stripes?” The mother answers, “It’s because...Well, they’re harder on black people.” Richard wonders why the black men don’t all fight the outnumbered guards; the

mother explains it is because the white men have guns. Having already established rifles as weapons to be used against a supposed “enemy,” his mother’s explanation of Southern justice recalls the extended analogy of *12 Million Black Voices* in which Wright describes the daily life of African Americans as a warlike state in which they battle for basic survival. The remainder of the conversation reveals that Richard first called the men “elephants” because he had confused the word with “zebras,” what the prisoners’ uniforms visually evoked for him. The black and white stripes cause Wright’s child self to associate the men who wear them with “beasts of the jungle” (*BB/AH*, 59). A century earlier, Frederick Douglass defined the principal experience of chattel slavery as the mental and physical degradation of bondpeople to a “beast-like” state.<sup>95</sup>

As a teenager, Wright finally acquires money to leave Mississippi, in part, through an illegal ticket-taking scam conceived by coworkers at a movie theater. Knowing that “if I were caught I would go to the chain gang,” Wright is reluctant to join the conspiracy but eventually reasons he has little to lose since his life is “already a kind of chain gang” (*BB/AH*, 204). As the narrated self weighs the potential consequences of the theft, his ruminations evoke the earlier scene of his childhood encounter with the chain gang and suggest that form of bound labor as a metaphor for Wright’s entire existence. While Wright equates feelings of non-humanness with the racist culture in which he comes of age, the epitome of that culture, for Wright, is the chain gang and its replication of the psychological experience of slavery.

Young Richard’s brush with the chain gang is actually the child’s second encounter with uniformed men. At nearly nine years old, Richard plays alone in a field, where his attention turns to a “strange rhythmic sound” followed by a “wave of black men draped in weird mustard colored clothing” (*BB/AH*, 55). As they pass, the formation engulfs the frightened child, initially too stunned to speak or

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<sup>95</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, with introduction and notes by John Stauffer (1885; repr., New York: Modern Library, 2003), 123.

move but who afterward sprints home to query his mother. She tells him that the people he saw were soldiers, or “Men who fight in wars...Because their country tells them to” (BB/AH, 56). Wright’s mother tells him the guns carried by the soldiers are intended for use against “the enemy,” which, upon further questioning, she defines as “The people who want to kill you and take your country away from you” (BB/AH, 57). The contrast between Richard’s childhood encounters with the black soldiers and the chain gang is especially important for a text written and published during World War II. While the observation of the chain gang exposes a legal system that is far from colorblind, the appearance of black recruits prepared to fight abroad “because their country told them to” indicts a nation that demands the military service of African Americans but fails to extend to them the full legal protections of citizenship. On that point, Wright was consistently critical. In interviews, just as he did in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright emphasized the country’s betrayal of black veterans during and after World War I.<sup>96</sup> In February 1940, well before the Pearl Harbor attack, Wright declared that African Americans had “no stake” in World War II, which he defined—simplistically to say the least—as a war to protect imperial powers France and England, who “oppress more Negroes and colonial peoples than all the [other] Empires of the world combined.”<sup>97</sup> In the same interview, however, Wright lauded the military service of black soldiers who “fought heroically” in the American Revolution, “a war for democracy and independence,” as well as those who “fought with the Union forces against the slaveholding Confederacy for freedom and citizenship rights.”<sup>98</sup> Among those troops was Wright’s grandfather.

Set in part during World War I and published as the Allies fought decisive battles of World War II, *Black Boy* evokes the Civil War service of Wright’s grandfather to highlight the contradiction

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<sup>96</sup> “Negros Have No Stake in this War,” in Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 26; “Are We Solving America’s Race Problem?” transcript of radio broadcast, in Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 74.

<sup>97</sup> Angelo Herndon, “Negroes Have No Stake in This War, Wright Says,” in Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations With Richard Wright*, 26.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

between the country's demands on black troops and its failure to render social and legal justice for African Americans. The grandparents' experience in slavery and Richard Wilson's military service are among the censored topics in Wright's family. The author often queries his grandfather about the Civil War—"how he had fought, what he had felt, had he seen Lincoln"—but "You git 'way from me, young 'un" is the grandfather's usual reply. What the author knows of Richard Wilson's past, he gleans from Granny's conversations. As a small boy, Wright is "mortally afraid" of the grandfather, whom his older teenage self considers somewhat pathetic. "Wrapped in the misty memory of his young manhood," the author recalls, his grandfather "sat his days out in his room where his Civil War rifle stood loaded in a corner, where his blue uniform of the Union army lay neatly folded" (*BB/AH*, 110). Now oblivious to what goes on in the house, this nostalgic figure spends his days absorbed in memories of a past that has become unspeakable in Southern society. Though the elder Richard makes few appearances in the narrative, the author's descriptions center on his grandfather's identity as a Civil War veteran. The grandfather's refusal to answer the younger Richard's inquiries and the social prohibition on discussing the Civil War render the grandfather's life story taboo, particularly as it unfolds in the grandmother's telling. The difference between the grandfather whose angry teeth-gritting terrifies his young grandson and the feeble sick man of Wright's adolescence suggests deterioration, perhaps explained by the personal history pieced together from Granny's conversations:

When the Civil War broke out, he [Richard Wilson] ran off from his master and groped his way through the Confederate lines to the North. He darkly boasted of having killed "mon' mah fair share of them damn rebels" while in route to the Union Army. Militantly resentful of slavery, he joined the Union Army to kill southern whites; he waded icy streams; slept in mud, suffered, fought...Mustered out, he returned to the South and, during elections, guarded ballot boxes with his army rifle so that Negroes could vote. But when the Negro had been driven from political power, his spirit had been crushed. He was convinced that the war had not really ended, that it would start again (*BB/AH*, 140-141).

By Wright's account, Richard Wilson spent the latter years of his life trying to procure the disability pension to which his military service entitled him. According to Wright, in the process of being

mustered out, the illiterate self-liberated slave had asked a white officer to help him fill out his discharge papers. Among the family's theories was that the officer, rumored to have been Swedish, misunderstood Grandpa's Southern accent and, alternately, that the officer had a poor command of writing. Whatever the case, the grandfather was discharged in the name of Richard Vinson, leaving no record that Richard Wilson had served in the Union army.<sup>99</sup> The grandfather engaged in a decades-long correspondence with the War Department, to no avail. He recounted battles and reconstructed conversations from memory, but the War Department refused to accept this as proof of his service. The grandfather's illiteracy required that he dictate his accounts for others to record and that letters denying his claim be read back to him. This was Wright's job, of which he recalls, "Grandpa would not blink an eye, then he would curse softly under his breath. 'It's them goddamn rebels'" (*BB/AH*, 139). Then, as though he doubted his grandson or feared repeating his original mistake, the grandfather would take the letter to a dozen of his friends and have them read it to him until he committed it to memory (*BB/AH*, 140).

Though Wright speculates his grandfather's opposition to white supremacy was the reason for the rejected applications, the author's account implies that the misspelling, however it occurred, stems from an inability to master language. Certain details of the grandfather's past in Wright's account deviate from the surviving military records and government correspondence. Richard Wilson actually served in the U.S. Navy from April to July 1865. Initially, the pension bureau claimed incorrectly that Wilson had failed to serve the ninety days required to qualify for benefits.<sup>100</sup> Subsequent denials centered on the botched discharge in the name of Vincent, not Vinson, as the grandson records.<sup>101</sup> Wright never mentions the dispute over the length of his grandfather's service. Whether he

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<sup>99</sup> Another rumor suggested the white officer was from the South and intentionally falsified the records.

<sup>100</sup> Rowley, *Richard Wright : The Life and Times*, 2.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

misremembered or intentionally changed the already erroneous surname remains unclear. What seems most plausible is that Wright selectively included, omitted, and altered details to make his grandfather's story stand universally for the federal government's misconduct toward ex-slaves and black veterans. The deliberate framing of the story to emphasize literacy as a marker of political power illustrates Wright's earlier assertion in *12 Million Black Voices*, that "the people who say how the world is to be run...[and] get enough to eat are the people who make books speak to them" (*12MBV*, 64). In *Black Boy*, the grandfather's inability to read and write necessitates his reliance first on the white officer, then on the people who mediate his correspondence with the War Department. Wright equates this absence of literacy with the breakdown of reciprocal rights and obligations between the citizen and the state. A soldier served his country only to have that same government deny him what it owed in return. As with the ruling on his mother's petition for child support, Wright associates this failure of American justice with the family's physical hunger, which the pension funds might have alleviated. In particularly lean times, Richard fantasized that the government had sent a letter promising the pension, back pay, and interest, along with expressions of gratitude for his grandfather's service (*BB/AH*, 140). That letter, of course, never came.

Another sixty years would pass before unpaid debts would emerge as a prominent theme in the representation of slavery, though Wright would reprise the language to characterize the civil rights movement. In a 1957 interview for French publication *La Nef*, Wright was asked to comment on the dispatch of federal troops to enforce school desegregation and protect the black students who had enrolled in Little Rock's Central High School. Wright replied by offering historical context for America's racist ideologies, starting with the introduction of slavery. He explained the presence of federal troops in Little Rock as a "direct resumption of federal activity" in the South, which discontinued shortly after the Civil War. "Had those federal troops remained in the South and made sure that the Negro had his constitutional rights," Wright asserted, "the racial conflict in the nation

today would have been resolved.”<sup>102</sup> Instead, Wright argued, the federal government left the defeated white South to its own devices and, thus, allowed a reversion to white supremacist rule.<sup>103</sup>

In a much earlier episode in *Black Boy*, Wright’s mother reluctantly reveals his grandmother’s personal background as young Richard interrogates the bewildering customs of the Jim Crow South. At an Arkansas train depot, the child notices two lines at the ticket window, one black, one white. Aboard the train, he finds the passengers similarly divided by color. This observation sparks a flurry of questions about the history and racial identity of his family, particularly Granny, whom Wright describes as “white as any ‘white’ person” (*BB/AH*, 24). Much as he would eventually query his mother about the army and the chain gang, the child’s questions challenge the tradition of racial segregation but also the very definition of race, which, the author implies, is both fluid and arbitrary. His mother deflects such questions as “Granny looks white...Then why is she living with us colored folks?” and “Did Granny *become* colored when she married Grandpa?” With his mother’s inability to provide a direct answer, much less a satisfactory explanation, the author shows the country’s racial division to be indefensible (*BB/AH*, 47).

Eventually, young Richard learns that Granny is a former slave and the name she held before marrying Richard Wilson was given to her by the white man who owned her. She never knew her father. In this scenario, the grandmother’s name was that spoken by the slaveholder, likely the same authority that also mystified her paternity. The mastery of language manifest in the power to name is the purview of the slave master, as, it seems, is the power to grant or withhold knowledge. As Wright’s conversation with his mother continues, he asks “Couldn’t Granny find out who her father was?” to which his mother replies “For what, silly?” (*BB/AH*, 48). When Wright suggests his absent father try to

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<sup>102</sup> “Are the United States One Nation, One Law, One People?” in Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 175.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 175, 177.



learn the identity of his paternal grandfather, the mother demands, “For What?” The mother’s responses, including a discouraging slap, imply a world view in which the past is off limits and social conditions are not to be questioned. Just as Wright later discovers the list of subjects one cannot discuss across racial boundaries, the Wilson family similarly enforces its own version of the unspeakable.

As Wright connects the racist institutions of his youth to a past no one will discuss, the link is further established by Richard’s discovery that the newspapers he has been peddling to his black neighbors consist of white supremacist propaganda. Like the schoolmate who recommends the job, Richard relishes the literary supplement but reads no other part of the paper until a concerned customer confronts him about the editorial content. The paper includes a long article that “passionately advocated” lynching and items “so brutally anti-Negro” that reading them gives the child goose bumps (*BB/AH*, 132). Wright describes in chilling detail a cartoon depicting a large, garishly-dressed black man as president. The caricature, with exaggerated features, sweaty forehead, and overflowing spittoon at his side, is apparently drawn to elicit revulsion, which the caption equates both with black political aspirations and interracial sex. This strange conflation culminates in the call to “Organize and save white womanhood!,” a long-time rallying cry of terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, which manufactured threats of sexual assault to justify their own commission of racially-motivated hate crimes (*BB/AH*, 132). On the wall across from the cartoon figure hangs a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, drawn to resemble a gangster. This, the first of three Lincoln references, including the list of topics that cannot be discussed, is followed within ten pages by Grandpa Wilson’s Civil War story. Through the mimetic violence of the political cartoon and the question Wilson refuses to answer—had he ever seen Lincoln—the author connects the white supremacist terror of his boyhood to the betrayals of his grandfather’s youth.

If Richard Wright considered life in the South a form of slavery, he also suggests continuity between his Southern childhood and life in Chicago. When the original publication of *Black Boy* ended

with Wright's eminent flight from Memphis, it falsely suggested that his experience of racism was limited to the South.<sup>104</sup> *American Hunger* revealed racism as not simply a regional, but a national phenomenon. This appears to have been the reason for the Book-of-the-Month Club request that Wright cut the Chicago chapters from his book. In the summer of 1944, Wright exchanged several letters with BMC juror Dorothy Canfield Fisher, in which Wright resisted Fisher's urging to transform the conclusion of *Black Boy* into an affirmation of American ideals. According to literary scholar Jeff Karem, Fisher "betrays an anxiety that Wright's critique challenges America's self-conception as a land of freedom, a challenge especially dangerous as America was mounting its decisive D-Day offensive in the European Theater."<sup>105</sup>

In *American Hunger*, the labor hierarchy of an unnamed Chicago hospital epitomizes the social strata beyond the walls of that research institute. On the morning he reports for work, Wright observes the "sharp line of racial division drawn by the hospital authorities" (*BB/AH*, 303). Reminiscent of the lines of the chain gang and their white guards and of segregated passengers at the Arkansas train station, Wright sees two lines of women walking through the underground corridor. The first is composed of white women in starched white uniforms; the second is made up of black women in ragged dress carrying mops and brooms (*BB/AH*, 303). The hospital administration exiles Wright and three other black orderlies to the basement, where they do not "mingle" with white visitors or medical staff (*BB/AH*, 303). The orderlies clean operating rooms and the cages of animal test subjects (*BB/AH*, 305). With echoes of the agrarian task system, a supervisor clocks Wright's work and calculates a time quota for each chore. As Wright scrubs a five-flight staircase, thoughtless staffers tread on the wet stairs and track dirty water where Wright has already cleaned. When a substantially younger Richard was promoted an entire school grade in two weeks, he announced his aspiration to "study medicine,

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<sup>104</sup> Karem, "I could Never really Leave the South," 694-715.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 703-704.

engage in research, [and] make discoveries” (*BB/AH*, 125). Of his actual work in the Chicago hospital, the author recalls, “Never had I felt so much the slave as when I scoured those stone steps each afternoon” (*BB/AH*, 307). Asserting that he and his black co-workers were treated “as though we were close kin to the animals we tended,” Wright compares the institutional structure of the hospital to that of the country as a whole. The men and their charges are “separated by a vast psychological distance from the significant processes of the rest of the hospital,” he writes, “just as America had kept us locked in the dark underworld of American life for three hundred years” (*BB/AH*, 314).

By the conclusion of *Black Boy*, the narrated Wright aspires to “fight with words” in the manner of his literary role model H.L. Mencken, but his authorial efforts do not progress beyond his poorly received *Voodoo of Hell’s Half Acre*. In Chicago, to “master words” becomes for Wright, “the single aim of my living” and his weapon against extreme alienation (*BB/AH*, 280). As Wright explains, he “wanted a life in which there was a constant oneness of feeling with others, in which the basic emotions of life were shared, in which common memory formed a common past, in which collective hope reflected a national future” (*BB/AH*, 279). Wright’s prescription is deeply concerned with the formation of cultural memory. Though he considered this vision unattainable at the time, his visit to the public welfare office reveals a remarkable phenomenon.

Despite his best efforts, Wright is unable to meet the weight requirement for a permanent job at the post office. In a cruel stroke of irony, one government agency withdraws stable employment based on the lingering physical effects of poverty that both Southern courts and the federal pension bureau failed to ameliorate. The stock market crash and the onset of the Depression make employment difficult to find, but Wright resists visiting one of the city’s relief stations. The morning his mother tells him they have no food left in the house, Wright finally relents but feels he is “making a public confession of [his] hunger.” At the welfare bureau, an agent asks Wright for a “short history” of his life. In the waiting area, as other clients begin to talk and share their own histories with each other, they discover

the sameness of their lives. They express a common sense of the past as betrayal and of the future as uncertain at best. From this spontaneous narration comes a realization of shared experience. As Wright identifies the Bureau of Public Welfare as the site of collective memory formation, the common experience the clients share is hunger. For Wright, what begins as a shameful admission facilitates a group consciousness that also anticipates his autobiographical act. Ultimately, Wright's narrative is his public confession of hunger, in the full social and political meaning of the word.

Wright's conflation of hunger, cultural memory, and racial politics provides an important point of contrast with *Gone With the Wind*. In the film, one of the most iconic scenes occurs in the garden at Tara, where Scarlett dramatically vows, "As God as my witness, I'll never be hungry again."<sup>106</sup> The film reimagines a scene that Mitchell's novel set in the slave garden at Twelve Oaks. There, Scarlett scavenges for vegetables even as the recollection of former feasts "had the power to turn her ever-gnawing stomach from rumbling emptiness to nausea."<sup>107</sup> This effects Scarlett's realization that her mother's model of femininity is useless to her in her postwar circumstances. While it signifies the narrow existence of white women in the patriarchy of the slaveholding South, Scarlett's hunger is made to stand more broadly for wealthy planters' sudden descent into poverty. It thus transforms the freedom of ex-slaves into a story of suffering imposed on former enslavers at the moment of emancipation. Reclaiming the tale of hunger in America, Wright recounts centuries of injustice endured by slaves and their descendants, often at the hands of the very class rendered sympathetic by Scarlett's gnawing stomach.

After an account of Wright's dealings with the Communist party, he reveals his "hankering to write," and a lifelong "hunger for a new way to live" (*BB/AH*, 356, 383). Following his bitter

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<sup>106</sup> "I'll Never be Hungry Again," *Gone With the Wind*, DVD, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).

<sup>107</sup> Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (1939; repr., New York, NY: Warner Books, 1999), 430.

estrangement from the party, Wright marches in the May Day parade but is forcibly tossed out of the procession by two white Communists. His ejection evokes the earlier psychological injury in which he felt he had been “slapped out of the human race” (*BB/AH*, 190). In the final pages, as Wright walks home in solitude, he hears a passing streetcar and thinks of the black Chicagoans leaving the employ of their “white masters.” Though the language of master and servant has long connoted labor relations between employer and employee, Wright renders his final portrait of social relations in Chicago in the same language of slavery he invokes to describe his degradation in the South. In his final lines, however, as he aspires to build a bridge of words, Wright initiates the plan that began to dawn on him as he watched the clients at the relief station recognize a shared, common experience by narrating their life stories. Wright sends words into the darkness and waits for an echo. For the sound to reverberate, something or someone must exist beyond the author. Writing is a solitary act, but for Wright, it is also a hopeful one, by which he rejects social isolation. Wright does not send words passively; he hurls them with great force. Aspiring to the example of H.L. Mencken who “fights with words,” if the author hears an echo, he sends more words “to tell, to march, to fight.” Wright’s closing paragraph evokes the soldiers on the march who enveloped his eight-year-old self and who fought in World War I. It reminds us of the troops of the Second World War marching and fighting as the book went to press, and it recalls Wright’s grandfather, who marched and fought in the Civil War. The conclusion of Wright’s original manuscript also resonates with the “upward march of American life” that concludes the text of *Voices*. Implying a purpose for his text like the stories told at the welfare bureau, Wright aspires to “create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all,” a hunger that transcends the social construction of race and represents a common humanity.

This final paragraph also appeared at the end of Wright’s account of his involvement and break with the Communist Party, which was printed in the *Atlantic* before the publication of *Black Boy*. The author’s final meditation was, therefore, available to a broad readership even before the release of

*Black Boy*. But the force of Wright's words was diminished by editorial decisions that removed his conclusion from the larger political trope of hunger. Not until 1977 would the disparate pieces of the manuscript rejected by Book-of-the-Month Club be widely published in a single volume. Under the title Wright had intended for the narrative as a whole, Harper and Row released *American Hunger*. By then, the slave past that loomed virtually unspeakable in Wright's childhood had reemerged as the subject of new novels and academic histories. In 1991, the Library of America published *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* in a single edition that finally restored the narrative of Wright's original manuscript. Ironically, that same year, *Gone With the Wind* regained bestseller status with the publication of Alexandra Ripley's *Scarlett*, the first of two sequels authorized by the Mitchell estate.

### Chapter 3

#### A Cold War Era Centennial: MacKinlay Kantor, Robert Penn Warren, and Two Sides of the “Great Alibi”

From 1961 to 1965, the United States observed the hundredth anniversary of the Civil War. Supervised by the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, the official commemoration was conceived, in the words of historian Robert J. Cook, as “an exercise in Cold War nationalism.”<sup>1</sup> Proponents justified the government-sponsored observance with the claim that a better understanding of the nation’s shared sacrifice in the Civil War would strengthen Americans’ resolve to defeat the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> In 1955, while the commemoration movement developed and one year after the Supreme Court ruled to desegregate public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*, two authors published novels that dealt significantly with the Civil War era. MacKinlay Kantor’s *Andersonville*, about the notorious Confederate prison, became a bestseller and won the 1956 Pulitzer Prize. Despite critical assertions that Kantor’s novel was unprecedented in Civil War fiction, its emphasis on sectional reconciliation and planter paternalism reiterated well-worn themes that gained new traction in the context of the Cold War and the approaching centennial. In Robert Penn Warren’s *Band of Angels*, published approximately two months before *Andersonville*, the Civil War is merely one epoch in a narrative that stretches from the 1850s to the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> Narrated as the autobiographical account of a planter’s daughter who learns her legal slave status after her father’s death, Warren’s novel is a scathing refutation of the myth of planter paternalism. *Band of Angels* suffers from a narrator who, despite her experience as a slave, adheres to the racist ideology of the white society in which she was reared. Yet Warren exposes a sinister

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 40-41.

<sup>3</sup> *Band of Angels* was released on August 22, 1955, *Andersonville* on October 27, 1955. Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 298; Harvey Breit, “In and Out of Books,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1956.

reality behind the myth of planter benevolence, in part, through explicit accounts of the domestic and international slave trades. Through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Age, Warren relates a tale of national moral decline. The novels that MacKinlay Kantor and Robert Penn Warren published in 1955 revisited subjects that both authors had explored in previous works and would again. Kantor, who had chosen the Civil War as the setting for at least two earlier novels and several short stories, published a fictional counterhistory, *If the South had Won the Civil War*. The story appeared first in *Look Magazine* in 1960 and was later included as a short story in the 1967 volume *Story Teller*. In 1961, Robert Penn Warren published an incisive essay on Civil War memory, first in *Life* magazine, then as the longer stand-alone volume, *The Legacy of the Civil War*. Writing and publishing at virtually the same time, Warren and Kantor offered two very different perspectives on slavery, the Civil War, and their significance for the Cold War era centennial. *Andersonville* focuses on the Civil War almost to the exclusion of slavery, which the novel represents as absolute paternalism. In both *Andersonville* and *If the South Had Won the Civil War*, Kantor advances a narrative of sectional reconciliation. *If the South Had Won* culminates in a theory of historical inevitability. By contrast, Warren's *Band of Angels* treats the Civil War as one era in the nation's much longer story of slavery. *The Legacy of the Civil War* sharply criticizes the popular view that the Civil War was inevitable. Warren's account credits the Civil War for helping to make the United States the world power it became in the twentieth century but also exposes Americans' self-deception in its remembrance of the war. Much of what Warren writes in *Legacy* anticipates his later assertion that the "Civil War was the biggest lie any nation ever told itself."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews, 1950-1978*, eds. Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers (New York: Random House, 1980), 207.



## MacKinlay Kantor's Civil War

*Andersonville* was not Kantor's first foray into Civil War fiction, nor was it his last. Throughout the 1930s, he published magazine stories that were reissued in 1958 as the collection *Silent Grow the Guns*. His first Civil War novel, *Long Remember*, appeared in 1934 and became a bestseller. In 1936, he published *Arouse and Beware*, following two escapees from the Confederate prison at Belle Isle. After *Andersonville*, Kantor returned to the Civil War on the eve of the centennial with a story that pondered what would have happened if the Confederacy had been victorious. While the romance and eventual union between Lucy Claffey and army surgeon Harrell Elkins reflects elements of Kantor's earlier Civil War oeuvre, *Andersonville* also shows traces of Kantor's experience as a war correspondent during World War II. Yet even as critics praised the novel's realism, *Andersonville* recycled old, familiar themes of slaveholder paternalism and sectional reconciliation. That reconciliation theme carries over into *If the South Had Won the Civil War*. Kantor resolves the speculative tale by having the U.S., the C.S.A., and Texas, which succeeded from the Confederacy, merge again into one nation. On the whole, Kantor's Civil War fiction offers barely a clue as to the politics surrounding the war. Slavery is rarely to be found, and in *Andersonville*, Kantor treats emancipation as a traumatic experience in the lives of ex-slaves.

In *Long Remember*, set in Gettysburg shortly before and during the Civil War battle, the main conflict is not the war but the adultery between Daniel Bale, a pacifist who refuses to join the army, and the wife of a Union captain. When a disgruntled ex-employee reports his suspicions of infidelity to Captain Fanning, the guilt-riddled wife Irene asks Bale to find her husband and convince him that the charges are untrue. The search leads Bale into the thick of the battle of Gettysburg, where he kills a man but manages to locate Fanning and dispel the captain's belief in his wife's betrayal. The novel ends with Bale making plans to join the army. In *Arouse and Beware*, Kantor mentions aspects of the

prison experience—hunger, body lice, physical deterioration—that would reemerge more graphically in *Andersonville*. But like *Long Remember*, *Arouse and Beware* relies on romantic tensions. Two escaped prisoners become rivals for the attentions of their traveling companion, a woman on the run for stabbing a Confederate officer. The men's simmering jealousies lead one nearly to murder the other in his sleep. In the novel's climactic scene, as approaching Confederates threaten to capture the trio, this same would-be assassin offers his life to distract the pursuers. His quick action allows his companions to reach the safety of Federal troops. In both of these early novels, Kantor's characters achieve redemption through heroic self-sacrifice. The absence of such valor in *Andersonville* suggests a change in Kantor's treatment of the Civil War and of war in general after his experience as a World War II correspondent.

In 1943, MacKinlay Kantor reported for the *Saturday Evening Post* from a U.S. air base in England. Flight crews were unwilling to carry an observer aboard their aircraft, so Kantor persuaded General Frederick Anderson to allow him to attend gunnery school. Contrary to regulations, Kantor flew as a backup gunner and reported on bombing missions first-hand.<sup>5</sup> In one article, which he frames as a letter to his eleven-year-old son, Timmy, Kantor accompanies the crew of a B-17 called the *Polly Ann* on the plane's first bombing mission. From the cramped nose of the aircraft, Kantor notes the roar of the engines, the uncomfortable weight of his strapped-on parachute, and a crewman's urgent dive to reach his machine and repel German fighters. He writes of a peculiar combat mentality in which "you are seldom consciously aware that you are fighting for your life" but annoyed by trivial details.<sup>6</sup> "Your throat," he writes, "is a layer of blotting paper—partly from powder smoke, partly from excitement—and only when the first concerted attack has skimmed past do you realize that you have been gulping

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Kantor, *My Father's Voice: MacKinlay Kantor Long Remembered* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1988), 171-72.

<sup>6</sup> MacKinlay Kantor, "Letter to a Boy Back Home," *Saturday Evening Post*, December 18, 1943, 90, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (18989756).

oxygen with your mouth wide open.”<sup>7</sup>

Amid his vivid descriptions of aerial combat, Kantor twice conjures the Civil War. Referring to the bombardier from Mississippi and the navigator from Florida, Kantor writes, “so, you see, I had two Rebs for company.”<sup>8</sup> Early in the flight, as mechanical noise drowns out conversation, Kantor and the crewman bond by showing photographs of their loved ones. The navigator carries a picture of his sweetheart in a small Bible. “I had heard legends about men carrying pocket Testaments into action,” Kantor writes, “but had never seen it before—I thought it was something that had happened only at Monmouth or Shiloh.”<sup>9</sup> Kantor similarly sprinkles Civil War references into a profile of General Anderson published the following month.<sup>10</sup>

Diverted by cloud cover, the plane group manages to bomb one of its secondary targets, a German airfield, but loses a B-17 crew who parachute out of their crippled bomber to an uncertain fate. Back on the ground at their airbase, as Kantor and his host crew watch the landing of other planes, some send out red flares to signal casualties aboard. An inspection reveals extensive damage and lucky near misses for their own plane. Of the ten-man crew and one journalist, “not one had a scratch.” The most powerful element of the story comes as a postscript of sorts. An editor’s note at the end of the letter reports that the crew of the *Polly Ann* “failed to return from a subsequent bombing mission” and are considered missing in action.<sup>11</sup>

A month earlier, Kantor’s story “This is What War is Like” described the fatal landing of a B-17. Heavily damaged by flak, the plane managed to return from its bombing mission, only to crash on

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>10</sup> MacKinlay Kantor, “Boss Bombardier,” *Saturday Evening Post*, January 22, 1944, 16-78, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (20002526).

<sup>11</sup> MacKinlay Kantor, “Letter to a Boy Back Home,” 92.

the airfield in England. Kantor records the cries of a bystander, capturing the bitter irony of the deadly landing: “Oh, God! Just when they got home!” The author seems especially intent on capturing observers’ shock and revulsion, including his own, as he describes the smoke and bits of metal “scattered far and wide” along with “scraps” of the crew. War, Kantor writes in his concluding paragraph, is “ten kids from nine states, coming in on a wing and a prayer, but I guess the wing wasn’t strong enough, or the prayer either.... [and] War is all the things that those of us here at this base saw today, and won’t forget if we live to be a hundred.”<sup>12</sup> In his memoir, *My Father’s Voice*, Tim Kantor relates how his father had once witnessed the fatal landing of a B-17 he would have flown on that day, except that a bureaucratic mix-up delayed his orders and kept him grounded at the airbase. As he watched the survivors return from their bombing mission, Kantor saw the plane he would have been aboard crash land and burst into flames. Among the elder Kantor’s effects was a piece of twisted metal the son supposed must have come from that wreckage.<sup>13</sup>

In early 1945, after more than a year back in the United States, Kantor returned to Europe, where he witnessed atrocities that would influence the writing of *Andersonville* almost a decade later.<sup>14</sup> As ground forces moved into Germany, Kantor accompanied an Air Force team sent to survey the damage that aerial bombing had done to factories and infrastructure; Kantor went along to help write the report. He arrived at Buchenwald the day after the Nazi concentration camp was liberated. Kantor recounted what he saw in a letter to his wife, reprinted in *My Father’s Voice*.<sup>15</sup> He wrote of the stench

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<sup>12</sup> MacKinlay Kantor, “This is What War is Like,” *Saturday Evening Post*, November 20, 1943, 34, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (18990563).

<sup>13</sup> Tim Kantor does not say conclusively that the ill-fated flight of “This is What War is Like” was the same one his father fortuitously missed, but the similarity of the accounts suggests a strong likelihood that the incidents were the same; Tim Kantor, *My Father’s Voice*, 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> During his time back in the United States, Kantor was asked to write a screenplay as an homage to returning veterans. The result was a book in verse, *Glory for Me*, which was the basis for the film *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Tim Kantor, *My Father’s Voice*, 187,190,197.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 194.

of death, detectable five miles from the camp. He wrote of the filth, of piles of bodies recently deceased and others improperly cremated. He was most affected by the children's quarters, he said, because he kept imagining his adolescent son in those conditions.<sup>16</sup> By Tim Kantor's account, Andersonville had intrigued his father since childhood, and the elder Kantor had considered writing a novel about the Civil War prison after he finished *Arouse and Beware*.<sup>17</sup> Though he had written about prisoners of war in his earlier Civil War narratives, the conditions MacKinlay Kantor witnessed at Buchenwald, his son suggests, confronted the novelist with a horror he had only read about until then. MacKinlay Kantor would later draw on that experience as he wrote *Andersonville*, the novel he hoped would become "the American *War and Peace*."<sup>18</sup>

Reviewing *Andersonville* for the *New York Times*, Columbia history professor Henry Steele Commager wrote, "Out of fragmentary and incoherent records, Mr. Kantor has wrought the greatest of our Civil War novels."<sup>19</sup> *Andersonville*, Commager admitted, does not contain heroes and villains, "nor narrative, nor plot in the ordinary sense." Other reviewers noted similar flaws, such as the absence of "dramatic force" caused by too much attention to too many minor characters, which "obscure[es] the novelist's direction and intent."<sup>20</sup> Seemingly, what allowed the most enthusiastic reviewers to overlook such major defects, was the sense that Kantor had offered something new and decidedly unromantic in Civil War fiction. For Commager, the novel's success lay in its panoramic portrait of the prison and in profiles of prisoners that seemed deceptively "miscellaneous" but were, he argued, "designed to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 194-195.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 194, 227.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Steele Commager, "A Novel of an Infamous Prison in the Civil War," *New York Times*, October 30, 1955, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

represent the whole of American society.”<sup>21</sup> Bruce Catton, who won the Pulitzer Prize earlier that year for *A Stillness at Appomattox*, began his review for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* by declaring *Andersonville* “the best Civil War novel I have ever read.” Kantor, Catton wrote, resists the delusory romance that had developed around the war and instead “presents it, uncompromisingly, as the shocking and all-but-fatal thing which it really was.”<sup>22</sup>

The novel may have presented too much of a shock to some readers. MacKinlay Kantor was “sometimes guilty of lapses in taste,” wrote Saunders Redding, reviewing the novel for the Baltimore *Afro-American*; but Redding justified these errors as “lapses toward truth” that could apparently be forgiven, along with the novel’s lack of character opposition, plot, or narrative climax. Redding concluded his analysis with an endorsement that also seemed to imply America was still waiting for its masterpiece of Civil War fiction. *Andersonville*, he wrote, was “the best novel of the Civil War so far published.”<sup>23</sup>

Other, less forgiving reviewers leveled charges of obscenity and disputed whether the book actually deserved its literary accolades. In August 1956, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reprinted a blistering essay by *House and Garden* senior editor John Durston that had appeared in that magazine’s July issue. In the essay, Durston declares awarding the Pulitzer Prize to *Andersonville* “a sickening blow to the pursuers of good writing.”<sup>24</sup> He cites Kantor’s novel along with Ivan Obolensky’s lesser known *Rogue’s March* as examples of publishers’ recent tendency to produce fiction that is either “monstrous” or mere “piffle.” Durston takes critics to task for “applauding” what he called “the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce Catton, “Great Novel of the Civil War; Its Humanity and Horror,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 30, 1955, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

<sup>23</sup> Sanders Redding, review of *Band of Angels*, by MacKinlay Kantor, (Baltimore) *Afro-American*, November 19, 1955, ProQuest Historical Newspapers Baltimore Afro-American.

<sup>24</sup> Frederic Babcock, “Among the Authors,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 26, 1956, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

degradation of writing” as represented by Kantor’s and Obolensky’s novels.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, Durston criticized the structure of *Andersonville*, which he pronounced “disorganized to the point of chaos.”<sup>26</sup> The writing was “clumsy and overblown,” the characters, flat stereotypes. But the charge that resonated most with *Tribune* readers, who were invited to respond to the column and did so in large numbers, was Durston’s claim that the book “crawls with uncalled for obscenities,” or what he dubbed the “entail school of writing.”<sup>27</sup>

Some reader responses merely sustained Durston’s criticism of the general state of American fiction and declared with evident pride that they had not read either of the novels in question and had no plans to do so.<sup>28</sup> One writer, identified only by initials, injected a bizarre white supremacist element to the discussion, stating that “this degenerative writing is the result of the letdown, morally, mentally and physically, on the part of the white race and is the beginning of the end of that race.”<sup>29</sup> A reader who agreed with Durston about the flaws of structure and character dismissed the other criticisms as simply “a matter of taste.”<sup>30</sup> But one woman, offended by the abundant “filth” in the novel, wrote that having no “cookstove, fireplace or furnace in which to burn” the novel, she returned her copy of *Andersonville* and cancelled her subscription to the Book-of-the-Month Club, which had selected the book as one of its offerings.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Yes; the Customer is Always Write.” Letters to the Editor, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 9, 1956, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

<sup>29</sup> M.P., “Beginning of the End,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 7, 1956, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

<sup>30</sup> “Yes; the Customer is Always Write.”

<sup>31</sup> Mrs. Kenneth W. Cleland, “Down the Sewer,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 14, 1956, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

The charges of obscenity are difficult to parse since most of the people who leveled them failed to elaborate on what exactly they considered offensive. Durston's phrase "entail school of writing" suggests his displeasure with the camp squalor and possibly the abject descriptions of death by hanging, shooting, and disease. Some readers may have responded to the professional activities to the local prostitute Mag Tebbs, the rape of her daughter Laurel by a Confederate soldier, and the botched abortion Laurel suffers at her mother's hand. Kantor perhaps intends Laurel's sufferings as an allegory for the prison's effect on the surrounding community, but he resolves the story much too neatly by having the local minister's wife whisk Laurel away from Mag's corrupting influence. Laurel exacts slight justice for the rape by striking her attacker with a buggy whip.

One peculiarity of *Andersonville* is that its stories of unfreedom are told less from the perspective of prisoners and slaves than from people in positions of power. Among the prisoners, Kantor moves from character to character, devoting sometimes an entire chapter to the background of a single inmate, but none of the prisoners is ever granted the same recurring status that Kantor affords to the Claffeys—the planters whose land adjoins the prison—the Tebbs family, or even the stockade superintendent, Henry Wirz. Of life in the camp, Kantor writes of the prisoners' hunger and of a gang of raiders who prey mercilessly on their fellow prisoners. The collective effort by the other prisoners to arrest and try these raiders for their assaults and robberies suggests their attempt to restore order out of the lawlessness that initially prevails in the prison. Wirz's final appearance as he is placed under arrest and transported for trial might be read as a corresponding pursuit of justice, except that Kantor portrays Wirz as a scapegoat for his neglectful superiors and seems to doubt that Wirz's prosecution sufficiently atones for the prisoners' suffering.

The novel begins, however, with Ira Claffey walking in the forest. Earlier that morning, as he supervised his slaves digging potatoes, Ira recognized a parallel between the principles of the vegetable harvest and the politics of war. Foreshadowing the atrocities about to unfold in his backyard, Ira



reflects, “One bruise, one carelessness, and rot begins...Decay is a secret but hastening act in darkness; then one opens up the pine bark and pine straw—or shall we say, the Senate?—and observes a visible wastage and smell, a wet and horrid mouldering of the potatoes. Or shall we say, of the men?”

(*Andersonville*, 7).<sup>32</sup> More than simply a metaphor for moral corruption, Ira’s meditation on human decay weighs heavily with the grief of his own family. Of the Claffey’s eight children, four survived childhood. The youngest, Moses, was killed at Crampton’s Gap. The eldest, Suthy, perished at Gettysburg. Their daughter Lucy loved a man who died of fever in a Union prison. As Ira returns from his walk and an unsettling encounter with soldiers scouting the future site of Andersonville prison, Lucy meets Ira to report the death of his last surviving son. Though Ira claims no secessionist sympathies and even seems to regret sending all of his sons to the army, he closes the chapter with a curse that represents the deepest feelings of sectional hatred: “Damn the Yankees. Damn them forever...God *damn* the Yankees. Amen” (*Andersonville*, 20).

News of Badger’s death begins a state of mental decline for his bereaved mother, placing Veronica Claffey in a literary tradition of grief-stricken Confederates, from Gerald O’Hara to Mattie Jameson, who are driven insane by the loss of family, wealth, or both. Within this literary type, Veronica Claffey is distinguished by the perversity of her delusions. In the first days after learning of Badger’s death, Veronica appears detached and unresponsive. This is followed by a compulsion to preserve her sons’ belongings, which she has packed away in trunks. The discovery of a long-forgotten beetle collection Badger assembled in his youth prompts Veronica’s fantasy of her seven dead children arranged like the beetle corpses—in rows, set on pins, and labeled with the children’s names. Reflecting her fear that Lucy would inevitably join her other children, Veronica imagines an empty pin waiting for Lucy and thinks, “I have a collection also” (*Andersonville*, 104). Eventually, Veronica

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<sup>32</sup> MacKinlay Kantor, *Andersonville* (1955; repr., New York: Plume, 1993), 7. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Andersonville*.

comes to believe that her dead children reside in Moses's old room (*Andersonville*, 260). Initially, Ira is uncertain whether all of the children are present or only the boys who died in the war (*Andersonville*, 260). He eventually comes to understand that Veronica is plagued by the delusion of being a young mother caring for several small children. At the same time, she also knows herself to be a parent whose children have been "slaughtered" (*Andersonville*, 334). At the height of her illness, Veronica wakes to the delusion of being cooked on her bed. Wishing to be free of the griddle and her anonymous tormenters, she wanders out of the house to the prison, where she is fired on by a guard. The gunshot rouses Lucy and Ira, who discover Veronica missing. After an exhaustive search, Ira finds her in a cesspool of drainage from the prison hospital. The progression of mental illness that leaves Veronica more and more detached from reality coincides with the deterioration of living conditions in the camp. By the time they are admitted to the hospital, most of the sick are too far gone to hope for recovery. The camp infirmary is not so much a place of healing as the last stop before the dead house, where their bodies are stored before burial. The intersection of these two stories, which finds Veronica wallowing in a pool of medical waste, suggests the ever worsening conditions of the prison as another form of detachment—from basic standards of human decency.

Early in the novel, as Ira hears the sounds of the workers—mostly impressed slaves—clearing the forest, he laments what an affliction the camp will be but considers the necessity of prisons. According to Ira, "a prison meant that the young fellows who'd be placed in it were living still; they were not extinct as the Claffey boys were extinct, but they were breathing and able to walk around...If there were no places of military detention, it would mean that every individual who yielded to superior force was slaughtered when he yielded. That would be a massacre in truth" (*Andersonville*, 58). As the novel unfolds, however, Ira's position on the virtues of military prisons proves naïve, at best. Kantor shows how conditions in the prison, evidenced by the death tolls in the final military report, constitute the very kind of massacre Ira Claffey wishes to avert.

Much of the foulness of Andersonville is represented by the constant, pervasive stench that offends the prison's neighbors. The conditions are also suggested by the ruminations of the stockade commander, Wirz, who vows never to refer to his charges as men, only as prisoners (*Andersonville*, 167). Wirz joined the Confederate army dreaming of military glory. He suffers constantly from a wound in his arm that begins to throb as he walks among the inmates for the first time and thinks, "These are the inventors of my misery" (*Andersonville*, 173). Blaming his Yankee charges for his personal torment fuels Wirz's preoccupation with prison discipline. "Wirz," Kantor writes, "worked zealously, feverishly at devising punishments for the insubordinate." These include foot stocks, spread eagle stocks, balls and chains, and withholding their already scanty rations (*Andersonville*, 224). When he considers the need for a new stockade, Wirz worries that the "devilish Yankees" might tunnel under the existing stockade and emerge out the other side like "fast-bread rodents" (*Andersonville*, 171). He thinks of his charges as "animals." When they pick lice from their bodies, they remind him of "monkeys"; when they fight each other, he regards them as "ferocious apes." Marshalled into squads, they become "herds of two-legged domestic beasts" (*Andersonville*, 225). Wirz's linguistic transformation of men into prisoners, devils, vermin, apes, and brutes reflects the process of dehumanization within the prison. The novel also includes graphic scenes of abject death: shootings by prison guards, a botched hanging, and a failed attempt to escape with a stockpile of corpses as they are carried out for disposal. The latter effort ends in death for the escapee. Even with these gruesome accounts, Kantor offers little of the day-to-day struggle for survival and relies largely on the statistics of the final military report to convey the aggregate horror of Andersonville.

Kantor's novel introduces several prisoners, but they are rarely sustained figures. Offering no heroes among the prisoners, Kantor takes as his protagonist the neighboring slave owner, Ira Claffey. Kantor's story is less about the experience of the prisoners than about Claffey's ability to overcome his personal losses from the war. The trajectory ultimately aims toward resolving sectional animosity. As

the Confederates fear the approach of the Federal army and rush to relocate prisoners, Claffey witnesses the survivors of Andersonville being marched away from the stockade. Kantor reflects, “They were enemies reduced beyond the point of enmity because suffering made men brothers, and made brutes into men to be pitied” (*Andersonville*, 582).

As the surviving prisoners are relocated, a young escapee, Nazareth Stricker, finds aid from an unlikely source, the young veteran Coral Tebbs, who was discharged from the Confederate army after the amputation of his left foot. Coral was wounded on the same day that Nazareth lost a hand, when their regiments fought each other at Gettysburg. The boys speculate that each might have fired the shot that wounded the other, but their mutual aid resolves whatever enmity might have existed between them. Before his enlistment, Nazareth Stricker worked in a prosthetic manufactory. He uses his knowledge to craft an artificial foot for Coral. When Ira Claffey discovers the fugitive, he wonders whether Stricker might have fired the shot that killed his son at Gettysburg, but the assistance Claffey ultimately renders signifies a reversal of the feeling that led him to curse all Yankees after Badger’s death.

If Union prisoners play a surprisingly small role in *Andersonville*, Kantor allots even less consideration to slaves. Twice the author refers to the prisoners’ blackened faces, which have been darkened by the smoke from pitch pine in their fires. Wirz’s attitude toward African American prisoners is that they are “an element apart” and “wicked slaves” who participated in an insurrection (*Andersonville*, 223). Beyond the connotations of race, which in Kantor’s figuration only contributes to the dehumanization of the prisoners, the author does nothing to explore the possible connections between the degradation suffered by Union prisoners and the experience of slavery. Indeed, the main role of bondspeople in *Andersonville* is to affirm Ira Claffey’s benevolence as a master.

The novel’s fourth chapter and the only one that ventures a portrayal of slave life opens in Pet and Coffee’s cabin on the morning that Coffee must join the other slaves who have been impressed by

the Confederate army to clear land for the prison. The couple's brief personal history reveals Pet's early life on a dirty plantation, where she endured deprivations of food, clothing, and wood for warmth. This background mainly serves to highlight the benevolence of the novel's representative slaveholder. After the death of her cruel master, Ira Claffey bought Pet and her mother at public auction, after which "there was every sort of decent generous allowance which you could name" (*Andersonville*, 44). When Ira sold most of his slaves in 1862, he did so at a considerable financial loss because he refused to separate slave families or sell to unknown buyers unless he first inspected the new living conditions. At the thought of abolition, however, Ira Claffey is "shocked speechless" (*Andersonville*, 97). In his youth, he visited a tenement section of New York near Five Points. The impoverished conditions he witnessed there shape Claffey's fears of what might await his bondspeople in freedom (*Andersonville*, 97).

At the end of the war, when the newly free Jonas approaches Claffey with news that he and his wife Extra want to leave, Claffey assembles his former bondspeople to address the new circumstances brought by Confederate defeat. He prefaces his comments with the news that "our General Johnston has surrendered" and "we are defeated by the North" (*Andersonville*, 722). The inclusivity of the phrasing suggests, however absurdly, that Johnston had somehow served as the slaves' general. Claffey implies that at the moment of their emancipation, the newly freed share in the defeat of the secession government and its army. Kantor revises the *Gone With the Wind* thesis of northern predation and Southern victimhood by recasting the war's suffering as the mutual affliction of "Yankees" and Confederates alike; but Claffey's paternalism assumes that former slaves are best served by remaining loyal to their former masters. In his view, interests of ex-slaves and former masters are one and the same. Claffey explains, "The National Government says that you are free. You belong to no one except yourselves, and to God above. I may no longer order you about except as one man orders another because he is the supervisor, the boss...But no longer as master and slave" (*Andersonville*, 723). This explanation is interrupted by a shrill outburst from former slave Naomi: "But you *is* our mastah." That,

Claffey explains, was formerly their relation: “I *was* your master; no longer; the Federal law says that you are free, and now the Federal law prevails” (*Andersonville*, 723). He goes on to explain that his former bondspeople may remain in the houses they occupy and continue their lives virtually uninterrupted, except that Claffey must now pay the workers wages. That prospect evokes a “general beaming” among the crowd. Claffey affirms that the workers will receive “real money” but with the caveat that if they do not work well, they will be turned out of their houses and replaced. Claffey’s explication of the conditions of employment read as an endorsement of his former paternalism. “I provided for you people, just as I provided for the many we had here before the war,” he says, adding that as slaves, they had no cares for the future, because he had assumed that burden for them. He recounts how he paid for the doctor’s services when Jonas broke his hip, when a hay bale toppled on Coffee’s foot, and when Naomi needed a tumor removed. He reminds them that he clothed and fed them “better than most black people, even in parlous times.” As Claffey tells the slaves their food, clothing, and medicine are now their own responsibility, his speech elicits a denunciation of freedom by the eldest freedman, Leandar, who “declared feelingly that he didn’t want any old Yankee law” and that “all this was none of the Yankees’ business” (*Andersonville*, 724).

Later, when Jonas restates his and his wife’s determination to depart for Savannah, he tells his former owner of a common expectation among ex-slaves that they will receive back wages for the labor they performed in bondage. The money, Jonas says, will be paid to them in Savannah. Claffey curses Jonas as a “damned idiot,” for believing the rumor, but Jonas and Extra leave anyway. Harrell Elkins, slightly more astute than Claffey, declares that Jonas and Extra do not really believe the story of back wages but only pretend to believe because Jonas is “the only soul upon the place who’s smart enough to realize that he is free.” Knowing this, Elkins continues, Jonas and Extra have “graduated—into a state of rapture without bound” where “they may see sights, hear sounds, tread among visions never glimpsed or heard or trod among by the other blacks” (*Andersonville*, 728). Whatever attempt Elkins

makes to understand the meaning of freedom to the formerly enslaved is negated by his assertion that Jonas and Extra's purported belief in the story of back wages "serves as an excuse for this seeming descent into starvation and homelessness" (*Andersonville*, 728). While the reports of back wages are indeed unfounded, the rumors might be read as a hope for reparations. Instead, the novel dismisses the freedmen's belief in their due compensation as simply naïve. Meanwhile, paternal to the last, Claffey provides food, money, and a mule and cart for Jonas and Extra's travel. Curiously, he rises early on the day of their departure to write what amounts to a traveling pass. In part, Claffey certifies that he has "given permission" to his former slaves to "proceed...to a destination of their own choosing," as though Claffey himself does not grasp the new power relation (*Andersonville*, 729).

In reality, Ira does not grant permission because none is needed. Possessing his full autonomy, Jonas defies Ira's wishes. Amid his efforts to dissuade Jonas from pursuing the back wage "nonsense" in Savannah, Ira claims a friendship with Jonas and, as his friend, forbids him to leave. Jonas's final answer is that he and Extra want to leave. Suggesting both resentment of the freedmen's self-assertion and his failure to comprehend their altered power relation, Claffey asks whether Jonas and Extra intend to take their children. Jonas replies, "Mastah, they our children. They ain't belong you no more" (*Andersonville*, 726). As Kantor describes this crucial moment between Jonas and Ira Claffey, the narrator claims that the course Jonas and Extra choose, "gave Jonas grief." But, writes Kantor, "he [Jonas] stood here now as a man, not a chattel; and this very transformation was a grief in itself. It did not kill the soul but it hurt the soul, and the wound was in Jonas's eyes as he cried." Kantor defines the wound as the transformation from chattel to man, from slave to citizen. Deplorably, he suggests that Jonas's trauma, and by extension that of his fellow freedpeople, was not their years of enslavement but the moment of emancipation.

## *If the South Had Won the Civil War*

Just as Coral Tebbs, Ira Claffey, and Nazareth Stricker achieve sectional amity in *Andersonville*, MacKinlay Kantor emphasizes reconciliationist themes in *If the South Had Won the Civil War*. In this alternate history, Kantor imagines that Ulysses S. Grant was thrown from a horse and fatally injured. The absence of the general's leadership changes the outcome of the Vicksburg campaign and throws the Union army into disarray. At Gettysburg, Jeb Stuart and his cavalry arrive in time to repel the Federal cavalry, while the fictional Lee has the tactical foresight to occupy the Round Tops right away. By transforming these critical Union victories into Confederate triumphs, Kantor imagines the Civil War ending in July 1863. Terms of the peace treaty require the United States to cede Washington, D.C., and all its buildings to the Confederacy. The U.S. capitol is relocated to Columbus, Ohio, and renamed Columbia. In this alternate history, Lincoln, not Davis, flees in disgrace. After a period of imprisonment, he retires to his Springfield, Illinois, residence and the infamy of defeat. The sentiments of the Gettysburg Address—never delivered in Kantor's scenario—appear truncated and far less eloquent in the resignation letter Lincoln writes in exile. He eventually practices law in Chicago, where not even Kantor's counterfactual tale spares the ill-fated president. On April 14, 1865, the exact date of the real Lincoln's assassination, during a performance of the same play, *Our American Cousin*, the fictional Lincoln is fatally shot in a Chicago theater "by an actor whose hatred for Abraham Lincoln had survived all changes of status and of capitals, [and] all affirmations of Peace."<sup>33</sup>

When news of the Confederate victory reaches Washington, the escaped slaves who have sought refuge in the contraband camp at Arlington force their way past the military guards. Their attempt to flee fuels anxieties of a slave revolt. In Washington and other cities throughout the North,

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<sup>33</sup> MacKinlay Kantor, *If the South Had Won the Civil War* (1960; repr., New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2001), 76. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *If the South Had Won*.



Kantor imagines lynch mobs perpetrating racial violence, much as terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan operated in the defeated South during the real period of Reconstruction. Kantor suggests these mobs as evidence that not only the government and the military, “but the soul and body of the Nation seemed to be falling apart” (*If the South Had Won*, 42).

In Kantor’s fictional scenario, the United States still adopts the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery in 1865. The counterfactual Confederate victory does not fix slavery as a permanent institution in the South. Abolition, Kantor writes, was “the trend of the nineteenth century and could no longer be ignored or denied” (*If the South Had Won*, 90). Kantor imagines a gradual Confederate emancipation, with individual states going “Free,” followed by national legislation in 1885 (*If the South Had Won*, 91-93). With this scenario, Kantor lends validity to neo-Confederate claims that emancipation would have happened with or without the war. In the actual defeat, James Longstreet incurred much of the blame for Lee’s loss at Gettysburg. In Kantor’s narrative, Longstreet succeeds his old commander as president and presides over emancipation in the Confederate States. In his “Freedom Day” message, President Longstreet describes what to him is an alternative history but what to the reader is Reconstruction as it actually unfolded. He envisions a defeated white South, with emancipation thrust upon it, resorting to a “common hatred directed against the Negro.” But Longstreet’s powers of prophecy end there. He claims that the independent Confederacy of 1885 harbors no such racial hatred and that by effecting emancipation through “self-determination,” the country will avoid the racial violence that would have been “the inevitable result” of Confederate defeat (*If the South Had Won*, 93). President Longstreet, according to Kantor, “seemed to assume that eventual difficulties would be minimized because emancipation had not been foisted upon a prostrate South in one fell swoop.” Instead, even in Kantor’s alternate history, “Friction was recognizable immediately; it compounded through the years,” and within one or two generations, the “color question became...the most painful disputation within the [Confederate] Nation” (*If the South Had Won*, 102).

Though Texas eventually secedes from the Confederacy, citizens of these two independent nations and those of the United States achieve a reconciliation of sentiment through their close military service in the First and Second World Wars. Spurred partly by the political threat of the Communist Soviet Union, the three nations move toward reconsolidating their powers. Kantor concludes his counterhistory with the revelation that the presidents and secretaries of state of the three countries are set to work out a plan for the “reunion and integration of the American peoples.” Their conference is set to open on the hundredth anniversary of the firing of Ft. Sumter. Kantor’s story concludes with the fractured United States reunited by a common opposition to Communism. On the eve of the centennial, *If the South Had Won the Civil War* embodied the same Cold War nationalism that characterized official government-sponsored commemorations.

It may be tempting to read Kantor’s conclusion as the ultimate triumph of American ideals over internal discord, but the story never addresses what the “reunion and integration of the American peoples” means for black citizens of the new, consolidated America. While Kantor’s alternate history offers plenty of altered details, from the survival of historical figures who actually perished in the two additional years of fighting, to a twenty-year delay in Southern emancipation, the larger story implies that if the South had won the Civil War, history, in the long view, would not have differed all that drastically from the reality known to readers. Certain facts of history are, in Kantor’s rendering, inescapable. Among these are the survival of the United States and the national reunion that similarly prevails in *Andersonville*, the assassination of Lincoln, racism, and racist violence.

### **Robert Penn Warren**

Unlike Kantor, Robert Penn Warren was deeply skeptical of inevitability arguments. In *The Legacy of the Civil War*, Warren compares two moments of national crisis, the Civil War and Cold

War, to dispel enduring myths that he considered both a hindrance and a national disgrace. By the time of the centennial, the Civil War and slavery were recurring subjects in Warren's work. In his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *All the King's Men*, the narrator's backstory focuses on a nineteenth century slaveholder. Warren based his narrative poem *Brother to Dragons* on the true story of a slave murder committed by Thomas Jefferson's nephews.<sup>34</sup> In *Band of Angels*, his most extensive treatment of slavery, Warren dispels the myth of benevolent paternalism that characterizes master-slave relationships in *Andersonville*. Fictionalizing arguments he would later articulate in *Legacy*, Warren also depicts the hypocrisy of so called Northern liberators, who betray their religious and abolitionist ideals. The narrative trajectory of the novel is one of perpetual repetition that reflects what Warren, in *Legacy*, suggests as the constant, debilitating reenactment of "the errors of our common past."<sup>35</sup>

Though it anticipated *The Legacy of the Civil War*, *Band of Angels* had its origins in *All the King's Men*. Published in 1946, Warren's novel of Depression era Southern politics also relates a story of nineteenth century slavery. Before working as a political operative for Governor Willie Stark, the narrator, Jack Burden, was a Ph.D. candidate who based his unfinished dissertation on the personal papers of a Civil War soldier thought to have been his great uncle. As a student at Transylvania College, Cass Mastern has an affair with the wife of his best friend, Duncan Trice. Trice dies of a gunshot wound to the chest that is presumed to be an accident until the wedding ring he never takes off is found under his wife's side of the bed bolster. Annabelle Trice interprets the ring as a sign that Duncan knew of her infidelity and that he ended his life intentionally. The ring is found by a slave, a waiting maid named Phebe, who, Annabelle is convinced, understands the ring's significance and torments her mistress with an accusatory stare. Annabelle takes Phebe to Paducah and sells her to a slave trader for \$1,300. Asked why she did not free Phebe instead, Annabelle says the family who

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons* (New York: Random House, 1953).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 59.

owned Phebe's husband would not have agreed to sell him and that Phebe would have stayed in Lexington to tell what she knew about Duncan Trice's death. Cass informs Annabelle that the reason the trader paid such a high price for Phebe is that she is light-skinned and "comely and well-made," implying she will be sold as a concubine.<sup>36</sup> In an attempt to avert this fate, Cass crisscrosses the state searching for Phebe with the intention of buying and setting her free, but he ultimately fails to locate her.

After returning to Mississippi, Cass operates his plantation long enough to repay his brother for the property, then emancipates his slaves. He tries to run the plantation with free black workers, but when one of the men flees with his enslaved wife, the couple are pursued, the husband is killed, and the wife is hauled back to her master. Afterward, Cass sends all of his former slaves north. At secession, though he could have received an officer's commission, Cass Mastern enlists as a private in the Confederate army and secretly vows never to fire a shot at the enemy. He goes to war carrying Duncan Trice's wedding ring as an emblem of his own guilt. When he is shot in the leg outside Atlanta in 1864, the wound does not at first seem serious, but Cass later dies of infection, or in Warren's words, he "rotted slowly to death."<sup>37</sup> Unable to finish his dissertation, Jack Burden simply abandons the project and walks out of his grad school apartment. His landlady later mails him a package containing the Cass Mastern papers, which Jack carries around unopened for years.

As an aid to Willie Stark, Jack Burden is assigned to find something incriminating on one of the governor's political adversaries. Judge Irwin is a respected political figure in state politics and a family friend Jack Burden has known since childhood. Jack's research into the judge's past uncovers that he once took a bribe to pay off a mortgage. The incident also implicates former Governor Stanton, the father of Jack Burden's childhood friend and ex-girlfriend; Stanton ignored a report of Irwin's

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Harvest ed. (1946; repr., Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 1996), 266.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

wrongdoing from a whistleblower who later committed suicide. The information is used as leverage in various political manipulations, but when Jack finally confronts Irwin, the judge, rather than submit to blackmail, commits suicide with a gunshot to the chest. Afterward, Jack learns that Irwin was his biological father. The political coercion and betrayal culminates in Jack's friend, Adam Stanton shooting Willie Stark in the chest. The lieutenant governor, who secretly provokes the attack, then shoots Adam and assumes the governorship upon Stark's death. The biography of Cass Mastern and the story of the 1930s Southern political machine both involve a betrayal of friendship, marital infidelity, suicide, and moral guilt. The end of the novel finds Jack writing—and expecting to finish—a book about Mastern's life. His ability to finally write the book reflects Jack's insight that “if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other... if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future.”<sup>38</sup>

While Jack Burden's philosophy anticipates Amantha Starr's parental epiphany at the conclusion of *Band of Angels*, Warren's research for the Cass Mastern episode led him to discover the true incident on which he based Amantha's story. Two sisters, the daughters of a Kentucky planter, were educated in northern boarding schools and raised to believe they were free and white. Upon their father's death, the sisters learned that they were slaves and, like Amantha, were sold to pay their father's debts.<sup>39</sup> Warren described *Band of Angels* as “an investigation of the nature of freedom.”<sup>40</sup> The author's inquiry and Amantha's story ultimately arrive at the existential solution that freedom is achieved internally (*Band of Angels*, 4). As Warren told one interviewer, Amantha is “freed by a master, she is freed by a war, she is freed over and over again. But she is not free, not in the deepest sense, until she realizes that nobody can set you free—in the end you have to make your own

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 656.

<sup>39</sup> Warren, Watkins, and Hiers, *Robert Penn Warren Talking*, 252-253; Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 291.

<sup>40</sup> Warren, Watkins, and Hiers, *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews 1950-1978*, 253.

freedom.”<sup>41</sup> For Amantha, that means reaching a resolution about her father’s betrayal.<sup>42</sup>

The general consensus of the novel’s critics, summarized by Warren biographer Joseph Blotner, is that *Band of Angels* is “an ambitious failure and perhaps the least satisfactory of his novels.”<sup>43</sup> Yet much of the novel’s criticism has also been problematic, as reviewers have often misinterpreted Amantha’s relationships with men and the sexual exploitation she experiences as a slave. In his review for *New Republic*, Leslie Fiedler wrote disdainfully that *Band of Angels* was “in all senses of the word, a woman’s book, the real end of the line... its scene—the bed!” He went on to describe Amantha as “a passive sufferer, who in the immobility of her self-pity permits man after man to make of her an occasion for self-destruction.”<sup>44</sup> In *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*, James Justus describes Amantha as “a whiner and a nagger, a spoiled petulant woman who refines a talent for manipulating men.” He accuses her of a “transferral of roles” in which Amantha the slave enslaves the men around her. Also denying her sexual abuse, Justus claims “Amantha’s most serious victimization is self-inflicted.”<sup>45</sup> These distortions, which reverse the roles of victim and abuser went virtually uncontested

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<sup>41</sup> Fanny Butcher, “The Literary Spotlight,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 4, 1955, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

<sup>42</sup> Warren, Watkins and Hiers, *Robert Penn Warren Talking*, 253.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography*, 300. Reviewing *Band of Angels* for *The New York Times*, Cornell English professor Arthur Mizener took issue with Warren’s ruminations about “identity ... reality, ...the goodness of evil intentions and the evil of good ones.” Their “constant reiteration,” he complained, “makes them seem like an obsession with a life of its own, almost independent of the story.” Also reviewing for *The New York Times*, Orville Prescott inferred Warren’s message to be that “true freedom comes from within and is spiritual”; but “as a didactic novel,” Prescott wrote, *Band of Angels*, “fails to dramatize its message with power and clarity.” The most laudatory review came from Cleanth Brooks, a longtime friend and colleague who had collaborated with Warren on books of literary criticism. Brooks wrote that the novel held “special pertinence,” following the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and he alone estimated that *Band of Angels* was “surely the most brilliant novel of the year.” Arthur Mizener, “A Nature Divided Against Itself: In His New Novel Mr. Warren Recaptures Life and Its Torments in Our Civil War” *New York Times*, August 21, 1955, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times; Orville Prescott, Books of the Times, review of *Band of Angels*, by Robert Penn Warren, *New York Times*, August 22, 1955, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times; Cleanth Brooks, “Powerful and Subtle,” review of *Band of Angels*, by Robert Penn Warren, *National Review*, November 26, 1955, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Leslie Fiedler, “Romance in the Operatic Manner,” *New Republic*, September 2, 1955, 29, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (14448542).

<sup>45</sup> James Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 237, 245-

until 1997, when Lucy Ferriss considered whether *Band of Angels* actually supports the critics' inclination to deny Amantha's sexual abuse and to blame her for the destruction of the novel's male characters. In *Sleeping With the Boss*, Ferriss concludes that while "*Band of Angels* is not Warren's finest literary work," the problem lies not with Warren's failure to "recognize sexual exploitation for what it is" but rather his inadequate development of the narrator's experience. According to Ferris, Warren "[veers] away from the 'plot of discovery' he begins to establish" in order to focus on the historical novel.<sup>46</sup> Margaret Jordan's *African American Servitude and Historical Imaginings*, published in 2004, similarly asserts the exploitative nature of the master-slave sexual relationship in *Band of Angels*. Yet Jordan charges Warren with failing to criticize either slavery or the sexual exploitation of slave women; she argues that Warren allows the purveyors of white racialism to deflect any culpability for slavery—the very form of denial Warren condemned six years later in *Legacy*.<sup>47</sup> Despite her often insightful analysis, Jordan overlooks important narrative reversals that actually support opposite conclusions about the novel. She also does not discern the lack of credibility in certain characters' denial of responsibility. Whatever its shortcomings, *Band of Angels* dispels the myth of planter paternalism and exposes the violence on which slavery was predicated. With its cyclical structure and focus on the moral decline of Northern idealists, not only is the novel consistent with Warren's centennial essay, Warren seems to have rehearsed in *Band of Angels* arguments he would later assert in *The Legacy of the Civil War*.

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<sup>46</sup> Lucy Ferriss, *Sleeping With the Boss* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 126-127.

<sup>47</sup> Margaret Jordan, *African American Servitude and Historical Imaginings: Retrospective Fiction and Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 41, 104.

## A Question of Identity

Amantha's narrative begins with a confounding question of identity, "Oh, Who am I?"<sup>48</sup> Though uncertain whether a mere fantasy, or a true cognitive memory, the narrator recalls herself as a child, playing by her mother's grave, located some distance from the family cemetery. The narrator envisions herself lying atop the "grassy trench," and feels "arms reaching over in love and tenderness," as she imagines being embraced by the mother she does not remember (*Band of Angels*, 4). The recollection of this scene in connection to the question "who am I?" suggests how much of Amantha's identity is tied to that lone, separate grave and to Aaron Pendleton Starr's evasion when young Amantha asks why her mother is not interred in the family graveyard where his wife is buried. The father replies that he wanted Amantha's mother nearer the house, where she would be closer to him and their daughter (*Band of Angels*, 8).

Though she describes her childhood at Starwood as a "happy time," the specific memories she recounts often contradict that characterization. In Amantha's early childhood, the two most influential adults are her father and Aunt Sukie, the slave woman she describes as her "black mammy." Reinforcing the stereotype of the black slave woman devoted to her master's child, Amantha claims Aunt Sukie "spoiled me because she loved me" (*Band of Angels*, 4). Of her father, Amantha says, "he indulged me, too," but does not speculate on his motives. Recalling her playthings, Amantha gives an account of two dolls, one that belonged to her father's wife that is found in the attic and given to her by Aunt Sukie, the other made for her by the slave Shadrach. The discovery of Eileen's doll prompts the conversation in which Amantha eventually asks about the location of her mother's grave and her cause of death. To the latter, Aaron Starr replies tersely, "She just died. Of a fever" (*Band of Angels*, 8). He

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *Band of Angels* (1955; repr., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 4. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Band of Angels*.



confiscates Eileen's old doll and buys another, finer one to replace it, but Amantha prefers the homemade Bu-Bula that she watched Shadrach carve for her. One night, as she ventures outside to retrieve Bu-Bula, who has been left in the yard, Amantha finds herself lost in the dark, then caught in a thunderstorm. She screams in terror but then feels herself being lifted up and hears her father's voice saying, "Manty—poor Manty, Manty Darling." As he addresses her by what the narrator calls her "baby name," the father's soothing words convey both pity and infantilization (*Band of Angels*, 11). Though her father carries her to safety, the memory of that frightful experience comes flooding back years later. As a slave, Amantha relives that childhood terror through another storm and crisis.

Amantha's first experience of slaveholders' power over bondspeople involves a slave sale in which she believes she may have had a part. Shadrach, who made her treasured Bu-Bula, dotes on Amantha, plays with her, and tells her thrilling stories. "Shaddy" has a "cubbyhole of a workshop" in the barn, where young Amantha likes to sit and talk or simply listen as he tells folk stories or "some rambling tale" about his youth and the people he recalls (*Band of Angels*, 13). One night, in the kitchen, as he begins to spin a scary tale, Aunt Sukie warns Shadrach to take care how he conducts himself toward Manty, or he might suffer a whipping. Shadrach, a proud man who has never been whipped, grows indignant and insists he has only ever been good to the child. He has been holding Amantha in his lap but shoves her off "in a gesture charged with rejection and revulsion." He replies, "Yeah, what she?—ain't nuthin, no better'n nuthin—yeah, what she?" (*Band of Angels*, 16). Confused and hurt by the rebuff, young Amantha feels that "the stability of things had gone," as the question, "Yeah, what she, what she?" echoes in her head. Though she does not recall the conversation, when it happened, or what she said, the narrator says she related the incident to her father, with the result that Shadrach was sold. By his daughter's account, the sale of a slave defies both Aaron Starr's ethics and practice as a slaveholder. "My father was a humane man," says the narrator, who cannot recall another instance of his selling a slave. "In fact," she says, "selling your people was against his principles." With

Shadrach, however, Aaron Starr “felt he had no choice, even if he knew that being sold off was, in the minds of many slaves, a worse fate than all the cowhiding and pickling possible” (*Band of Angels*, 18).

Though Aunt Sukie never explicitly states Shadrach’s supposed offense, her reprimand has been read as an allegation of sexual misconduct by both Margaret Jordan and Lucy Ferriss.<sup>49</sup> Jordan, who considers the relationship to have an “unwholesome quality,” also acknowledges, “It is not perfectly clear whether Shaddy is merely a nice old guy paying attention to a lonely child, or if there is some illicit activity taking place.”<sup>50</sup> Though the latter possibility cannot be totally discounted, readers should consider how a charge of sexual misconduct in the 1950s, when Warren wrote *Band of Angels*, or in the 1850s, when the episode is set, would be coded with the racist politics of that era.

Within a week of the novel’s release, in a case that galvanized the civil rights movement, a black teenager from Chicago visiting relatives in Mississippi was kidnapped, beaten, and shot to death after he reportedly flirted with a white woman on a dare. Fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was abducted from his great-uncle’s cabin by armed white intruders who later shot Till in the head. They tied a heavy fan around his neck for weight and dumped his body in the Tallahatchie River. Roy Bryant, the husband of the grocery store clerk Till had approached, and his half-brother J.W. Milam were tried for the murder and found not guilty by an all-white, all-male jury. After the acquittal, Milam and Bryant confessed to journalist William Bradford Huie, who paid between \$3,600 and \$4,000 to interview the two defendants and Bryant’s wife, Carolyn. In an article that first appeared in *Look* magazine, Milam claimed that he and Bryant initially planned only to pistol whip the youth but decided to kill Emmett Till after he boasted of his sexual relationships with white women and because he carried in his wallet a photograph of a white girl who Till claimed was his girlfriend in Chicago.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Jordan, *African American Servitude and Historical Imaginings*, 69-70; Ferriss, *Sleeping With the Boss*, 120.

<sup>50</sup> Jordan, *African American Servitude and Historical Imaginings*, 69-70.

In the long and terrible history of lynching that preceded Emmett Till's murder, the lie of sexual misconduct toward white women was often invoked to justify white supremacist violence against black men. Similarly, Shadrach's familiarity with Amantha, though probably quite innocent, violates behavior norms governing race, gender, and class in a slaveholding society. Readers might reasonably infer that Amantha's unchaperoned visits to Shadrach's workshop elicit a warning from Sukie not because they involve abuse but because such interactions are deemed inappropriate for a black male slave and his master's ostensibly white female child.

If Shadrach does pose a threat, it is more likely the possibility that he will reveal Amantha's racial identity and legal status as a slave. As Jordan aptly observes, the description of Bu-Bula suggests that with the doll he created for Amantha, Shadrach may have signified the child's own multi-racial identity.<sup>52</sup> While the bloodcurdling tales Shadrach tells in his workshop are rooted in the very real violence of slavery, the true stories of Shadrach's past and the people he has known apparently do not, but easily could, divulge the fact of Amantha's enslavement. Shadrach nearly discloses the secret with the question, "what [is] she?" as he alludes to the legal reality that Amantha is a slave. Concern that Shadrach might impart this confidential fact seems all the more likely as the motive for his sale, considering that after the sale, Amantha is denied the company of her former playmates, the slave children who live in the quarters. Her isolation seems calculated to prevent Amantha from learning her slave status and to reinforce her self-concept as Aaron Starr's free, white daughter.

The memory of Shadrach's sale and her sense of complicity plague Amantha into adulthood, but her inability to remember actually informing on Shadrach is problematic. Though she may have forgotten the details of her betrayal, Amantha's culpability also may be based on a false assumption.

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 17, 21, 52-53.

<sup>52</sup> Jordan, *African American Servitude and Historical Imaginings*, 59.

The narrator says she knows she told on Shadrach because he was sold. She merely assumes that she was the cause but does not in fact know that something she told her father caused Shadrach's sale, or even that she told her father anything at all. Her specious logic allows for the possibility that Amantha is not her father's source or that the sale happens for other reasons, perhaps even the financial troubles that eventually lead to Amantha's sale. Whatever the case, her guilt over Shadrach's fate is one of many instances in which the allocation of blame does not hold up under scrutiny.

### **A Mask for Evil**

At age nine, Amantha leaves her father's plantation for the first time to enroll at Oberlin, where the anti-slavery views of her peers, coupled with her own emerging religious sensibility, lead Amantha to a moral crisis over her father's slaveholding. The problem, she explains, was "How could my salvation be complete if my father still held slaves?" One fellow student's charge that Amantha "lives on black sweat," evokes the mental image of her "spooning happily into a steaming cauldron of black sweat," which causes Amantha to vomit, though more from the imagery itself than from "moral horror" of her personal association to slavery. Finally recognizing an opportunity to assure her father's salvation as well as her own, Amantha determines to address the matter during a school break. Insisting that he "jeopardized my soul by making me live on black sweat," Amantha tells her father he should emancipate his slaves (*Band of Angels*, 30). Among his justifications for continuing to hold people in slavery is the paternalistic assertion that even if he freed his bondspeople, he would "have to take care of 'em anyway" (*Band of Angels*, 33). Aaron Starr's failure to manumit his biological child or make any provision in his will to free her posthumously seems all the more egregious, given her direct appeal for emancipation.

Despite a rift in their relationship following the emancipation talk, Amantha unexpectedly

defends her father in a debate that frames the novel's position on the benevolent slaveholder. As Amantha describes the festivities of a corn husking, her friends are appalled to learn that Aaron Starr gives whiskey to his slaves and makes them work at night. Amantha explains that his aim is not, as one accuser suggests, to "bribe with strong drink"; he simply wants the slaves to enjoy themselves. After many months of discontent over Starr's slaveholding, Amantha answers the criticism of her peers with the insistence, "But he's good!" (*Band of Angels*, 37). Her father's chief denouncer, Seth Parton, who is also the object of Amantha's first adolescent crush, warns, "We must never be deceived by incidental virtue." He speculates that the goodness Amantha attributes to her father "may be the mask for evil" (*Band of Angels*, 37). The next day, one of the students restates the arguments against slavery that Amantha already knows and believes but cannot bring herself to apply to her father. She rejects the student's suggestion that they pray for her father's salvation. Later, when Seth attempts to apologize for the distress their conversation caused, he articulates the novel's central argument about slavery and slaveholding. "The good master is the worst enemy of justice," he says. "Indulgence rivets the shackle. Affection corrupts the heart. Kindness seduces the—" Realizing he need not tell Amantha what she already knows, he stops midsentence, but his warning about the kindness of slaveholders resonates through the prewar section of the novel and through Amantha's enslaved experience.

Seth Parton also plays a crucial role in Amantha's final days at Oberlin. For his first sermon as a student of theology, Seth explores the school's abandoned doctrine of sanctification, the belief that one might achieve "Christian perfection in this life...by a sensibility so charged with holiness that temptation might not prevail" (*Band of Angels*, 46). Immediately after he delivers his sermon, Seth conducts Amantha to the site in the woods where a notorious former student, Horace Norton, once planned to seduce a young woman to whom he had penned salacious letters. The postmaster, Mr. Taylor, suspicioned the content and opened the letters, which he found to be "obscene." Taylor forged a reply making Norton believe his correspondent agreed to meet for a "woodlawn tryst." When Norton

arrived, Taylor and some theology students apprehended the would-be seducer, lectured him for an hour on the “cupidity of the flesh,” then “spread-eagled him on a log for the blood-flogging.” Horace Norton was expelled, but Taylor was later found to have embezzled money from the post office and from the *Oberlin Evangelist*, of which he was editor. He also had “lured into concubinage a young female attached to his household, had got her with child, and had had an abortion performed upon her.” She does not know how directly Taylor—who once seemed a likely candidate for sanctification—influenced the school’s doctrinal change, but by the time of Amantha’s enrollment, “the emphasis was on constant vigilance against sin rather than a yearning toward perfection in this life” (*Band of Angels*, 46). Leading Amantha to the place in the woods where Horace was apprehended, Seth reasons that if Amantha prays there, the site of Horace’s sin can be redeemed, and her prayer will be a sign that sanctification is possible. In a conflation of teenage lust and religious fervor, Seth Parton wields an ominous power as he stands over Amantha commanding her to pray: “Oh, Lord, show me the performance of sanctification...that I may know it...and knowing it with my beloved...then enter into the fullness of our joy” (*Band of Angels*, 52). Yet the joy he promises is not to be realized.

Soon after their excursion, Seth Parton brings Amantha news of her father’s death and a story nearly as scandalous as the Norton and Taylor affairs. Repeating the information from a friend who has just returned from Cincinnati, Seth tells Amantha her father has died in that city, where he “consorted in adultery.” Since her enrollment at Oberlin, Amantha has not returned to Starrwood but meets her father in Cincinnati for holidays. These visits are usually spent in the company of Idell Muller, the wife of Aaron Starr’s business associate. Mr. Muller’s recent absence is explained as an extended illness that finally required him to be admitted to a nursing facility. On her last visit, Amantha ceased to believe the story and surmised that the adults made it up to conceal Mr. Muller’s death. She also perceived a romantic attachment between her father and Idell Muller. As Seth reports Aaron Starr’s death, he also informs Amantha that Mr. Muller is alive and serving a prison sentence for embezzlement. According

to Seth, Amantha's father is widely known to have "had some concern with the transaction," implying his complicity in the crime, a resulting financial loss, or both.<sup>53</sup>

Amantha journeys back to Starrwood for her father's funeral but arrives just as the service is ending. Despite the clues of her childhood, the knowledge that she is her father's legal property eludes Amantha until a creditor demands that she be taken into custody and sold to satisfy Aaron Starr's debts. Marmaduke offers to settle his claim for \$1,200, but none of the mourners has the means to buy Amantha's freedom. She is sold to a trader preparing a coffin for New Orleans.

### **"Suspended in a Vacuum of No Identity"**

Following Amantha's arrest and sale, Warren explores the psychological experience of enslavement from the perspective of someone who has grown up believing herself free and white. Amantha never significantly deviates from that self-concept. While her enslavement ultimately indicts the institution, as well as the buyers, sellers, and owners of bondspeople, it does not elicit a sense that Amantha shares a common experience or identity with other slaves. Forsaken by her father and cast into an unfathomable new reality, Amantha experiences a crisis of identity, guilt, and denial. Reflecting that her soul has been "slain at the graveside of my father... slain there by his betrayal," the "numbness" she feels in the early days of her enslavement, matches the "abstract definition of the law," that regards her as "a chattel, a non-person, the thing without a soul." Amantha considers herself "suspended in [a] vacuum of no identity" (*Band of Angels*, 62). She also worries that she had not felt adequate sympathy for the suffering of slaves and was now being punished for that failing (*Band of Angels*, 63).

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<sup>53</sup> Seth Parton's report is ambiguous. The statement could be interpreted to mean that Amantha's father was the victim of Muller's theft, but given Warren's subsequent emphasis on repetition and the implied parallel to Taylor's moral failings, it seems more likely that Parton means to implicate Starr in the crime.

Though pressed into bondage, Amantha does not identify with other slaves. She rejects both the condition of enslavement and the racial identity associated with slavery. She expresses her disdain in her repeated use of the vulgar epithet “nigger,” as when she longs to shout, “I wasn’t a nigger, I wasn’t a slave, I was Amantha Starr” (*Band of Angels*, 65). She defines her identity in direct opposition to being black and being a slave. Wondering why the slaves held on the lower deck offered no resistance, why they did not attempt escape or death, Amantha is temporarily comforted by their “infirmity of spirit” and the thought that “they were no better than I.” This thought, however, incites a “flash of refusal” and Amantha’s declaration, “I was not to be compared with them, I was not one of them, I was no nigger.” She then rationalizes that her enslavement is “simply an absurd mistake...and not the true nature of things.” She grasps at the hope that either Idell Muller or Seth Parton will find and redeem her. The mistake will be set right, she insists, because she was Amantha Starr, “not somebody else, somebody without value, unloved.” Amantha defines personal value in opposition to her chattel status. In her reckoning, being a slave, having a monetary price affixed to one’s person, means being unloved. That, in turn, means having no value. She deceives herself in thinking that either the object of her infatuation or her father’s mistress will rescue her, perhaps because the alternative, accepting that her enslavement is indeed “the true nature of things,” means acknowledging that her father thought so little of Amantha, he subjected her to a fate that violated his principles as a so-called “good” master. By his inaction, he allows Amantha’s sale and denies his own child the consideration he extended to almost all of his human property, with the notable exception of Shadrach (*Band of Angels*, 75).

Before Amantha decides her best hope lies with Seth and Idell, the question of who might save her first conjures an image of her mother, whose face she imagines as “calm and beautiful.” Sustained by the belief that her mother loved her, the narrator recalls that her “heart gushed with joy.” Amantha’s happiness, is short-lived, however, as she says to herself, “but she was a nigger” (*Band of Angels*, 75).



With those hateful words, the daughter rejects the comforting maternal love, along with the parent whose inherited slave status is the source of Amantha's bondage.

As Amantha considers options for resistance, what the narrator calls her first "attempt to get free," is a thwarted attempt to hang herself from the iron bars over her window. Another slave posted as guard outside the room finds Amantha dangling from the bars and cuts her down. She describes the incident as a "reflex," as though she acts without volition (*Band of Angels*, 67). Amantha again conflates death and liberty after an old slave woman refuses to hear Amantha's story. The woman's unwillingness to console Amantha makes her feel as if "Aunt Sukie herself" has abandoned her. Amantha fails to recognize the presumptiveness of her expectation that the woman should act the part of her former slave nurse. Lying in her cot, wishing she were "dead and free," Amantha recalls a story she heard at Oberlin about slave ship captives. Shackled and "packed spoon-fashion" so tight they cannot move, some slaves hold their breath or swallow their tongues in the hope that they might escape the squalid ships and "fly away, back home, over the ocean" to their villages and their loved ones. Amantha tries "experimentally" to draw back her tongue but wonders, if she were to fly, where she would go (*Band of Angels*, 74). Warren's account of bondage, in which slaves attempt suicide as an alternative to remaining enslaved, is a stark contradiction to the view of slavery as benevolent paternalism advanced in *Andersonville*.

At the slave house in New Orleans, Amantha witnesses various pre-sale rituals intended to deceive potential buyers. She recounts how gray hairs are tweezed and bootblacking is rubbed into the scalp of the oldest slave on the coffer; under threat of being sent to the trader's plantation, the fifty-year-old man is told to subtract several years from his actual age (*Band of Angels*, 84, 87). In Memphis, the trader Calloway purchases at a bargain price three slaves who show signs of malnourishment. During the remainder of the steamboat trip, Calloway prescribes a special diet for these slaves, a "sinister benevolence," Amantha likens to fattening a goose for slaughter. In the communal holding

room, Calloway supervises as one man's skin is scrubbed with a broom and rubbed with a compound of bacon grease and soot. Witnessing the bathing process and the man's exposed body, Amantha feels herself trapped in an "obscene dream" (*Band of Angels*, 85). As the slaves are marshaled through the streets to the site of the auction, Amantha tries to run. As with the preparations for her hanging, her attempt to escape lacks conscious volition and the narrator claims to have been surprised by her action, which is quickly thwarted by Calloway's grip on her shoulder.

In her account of the auction, the narrator relates how potential buyers inspect the bodies of the enslaved. They examine teeth, joints, and hands to assess the slaves' suitability for picking cotton. On the flesh, they look for marks of whipping, considered a sign of a bad slave. Throughout the intrusive and demeaning examinations, Amantha observes that the slaves "[stand] dumb and indifferent," or "[grin] with a slack amiability." Directing her abhorrence at the people who submit to the treatment rather than the buyers and traders who subject them to it, Amantha concludes, "I hated them all" (*Band of Angels*, 87). When her turn comes, Amantha is bought by a man who pays \$2,000 and spares her the degradation of being examined by a rival bidder.

### **Slavery, Paternalism, and the "Kind" Master**

In the house of Hamish Bond, Amantha experiences a form of bondage entirely inconsistent with the horrific stories of slavery she has heard as a student at Oberlin. Bond, who has a reputation for lenience, embodies the figure of the humane, paternal master. The treatment Amantha receives in his household presents Bond as the antithesis of the "oppressor" she expects him to be. Her conversations with another slave, Michele, contradict Amantha's preconceptions about their master's cruelty. Though Amantha promises to work, Michele implies that nothing of the sort will be demanded of her. Amantha finds herself in the bizarre position of being impressed to a forced labor system but expected to perform

no labor. For his part, Hamish Bond treats Amantha as something between a houseguest and a dependent minor. Before he leaves his New Orleans house for one of his plantations, he gives Amantha a gift of sweetmeats and instructs Michele to purchase fabric to make new clothes for Amantha. Upon his return, he invites Amantha, a slave, to dine with him. He makes sure she receives an allowance and grants her unsolicited permission to go about the city unaccompanied. Amantha resents that Bond's gift of sweetmeats is a present one would give a child, yet when he asks what he should call her, she replies with her "baby name," Manty. When he addresses her directly, the narrator says, hearing the name "touched off a gush of sweetness in my heart," followed immediately by shame. Explaining her initial reaction, the narrator reflects that she was "not much more than a child," who had, "in a way, lost my very identity," but hearing her name spoken by the man who was "the source of all power and the disposer of fate," gave it back to her (*Band of Angels*, 105).

When she discovers that Michele and Rau-Ru, who runs one of Bond's plantations and holds the privileged title of k'la, were born outside the country, Amantha urges Michele to denounce Bond publicly for breaking the law against importing slaves. Earlier, when Amantha asks Michele if she is a slave, her reply, "yes, that is one way it might be said," suggests a reluctance to consider herself Bond's property. When Amantha demands to know why she has not exposed Bond and sought her freedom, Michele says she has had no reason to denounce him. Rau-Ru, she says, would think it strange to be called a slave (*Band of Angels*, 107-108). Michele cannot answer Amantha's questions about why Bond bought her. She says he may not know himself but tells Amantha "he is a kind man, and you are fortunate." Michele then qualifies her statement: "it is a strange kindness...you might say that his kindness is like a disease. He has it as a man might have a long disease" (*Band of Angels*, 110). Michele explains this assertion with the story of the yellow fever epidemic of 1853. Bond turned his house into a makeshift hospital ward, where he and Michele nursed the sick and dying.

Though Michele shows no inclination to pursue her freedom, Amantha secretly plots to escape.

She learns the city and amasses a small savings from the stipend Bond makes available to her. At first, she spends thriftlessly to make Michele think she does not know the value of money and, thus, divert suspicion (*Band of Angels*, 120). When Bond suggests that Amantha travel into town alone—what eventually affords her the opportunity to escape—she confesses her fear of the giant dog Rob Roy, whom she assumes is vicious and probably used to pursue runaways. Bond responds by demonstrating that the dog is actually tame and harmless. As she plots her escape, Amantha’s covert measures to avoid suspicion, including the money ruse with Michele, buying a valise the day of her departure, and leaving dresses on order with the seamstress so as not to be seen leaving the house with luggage, all show careful planning on her part, but nothing before her attempted flight suggests the necessity of those precautions. As her anxieties go unrealized, Amantha’s perception of danger is not substantiated by a single instance of cruelty or degradation. The disparity between Amantha’s expectations and experience of bondage begins to raise the dual possibilities that Warren has written a proslavery novel and that his heroine suffers from acute paranoia. In reality, Bond’s lenience as a slaveholder is only a prelude to Warren’s exposé of the good master; and as Amantha later explains, Bond’s kindness is itself a kind of torment.

For all of her careful preparations, Amantha thwarts her own escape. When she sees Rau-Ru walking down the street just as she prepares to board the steamboat, Amantha assumes incorrectly that Bond has sent him to follow her. In her panic, she reveals herself to Rau-Ru and invents a complaint to distract him from her real purpose (*Band of Angels*, 127). Back at the house, she accuses Bond of setting spies on her. Believing—again incorrectly—that she has been discovered, Amantha admits that she was running away and lashes out at Bond. “I wish I had been taken to any other house in the world. And not yours,” she tells him (*Band of Angels*, 130). When Bond says he will not force her to stay, she thinks he means he will sell her, but he offers to send her to Cincinnati, where he has a business associate who will make arrangements for her. For modern readers, Bond’s conduct to this point reads

eerily like an affirmation of planter benevolence, but Bond's kindness is soon discredited.

In *Band of Angels*, slaveowners most often prove their depravity by revealing themselves as sexual predators. The morning of her sale in Kentucky, Marmaduke, more as a taunt than a warning, predicts that Amantha will be exploited by the man who buys her. He also admits that he came close to assaulting Amantha the first night she was in custody (*Band of Angels*, 65-66). On the steamboat, one of Calloway's slaves, apparently jealous of the trader's attentions toward Amantha, repeats Marmaduke's taunt. The likelihood that Amantha will suffer sexual abuse by her new master, along with the mystery of why Bond bought her, looms ominously over her early days in his household and casts a shadow of suspicion over his kindness; but as her fears, from the not-so fierce hound to being found out as a runaway, are one by one dispelled, it seems as if Amantha actually may regain her freedom in Cincinnati without suffering the exploitation of a licentious master.

After her failed escape, Amantha wakes in the night, drenched from a terrible storm. She rushes to close the window, but a pane of glass blows out and shatters. Suddenly aware of being lifted and carried to the bed, she feels herself the lost, frightened child who years earlier went outside to save her favorite doll and was caught in a storm. As she conflates the present storm with the one from childhood, the novel briefly casts Bond as rescuer, the role previously enacted by Amantha's father. As Warren recreates the circumstances of that terrifying night years earlier, Aaron Pendleton Starr, the "good" slaveholder and Hamish Bond, who has "kind like a disease" are momentarily interchangeable.

The confusion of Hamish Bond, Aaron Starr, and the two storms highlights the exploitative nature of the sexual relationship Bond initiates with Amantha. Bond's childish gift of sweetmeats and Amantha's explanation for the fondness she feels when he first speaks her childhood name—that she was in fact, "not much more than a child"—conveys a sense that Bond preys sexually on a female

slave, who is also characterized as a child.<sup>54</sup> Twice in the span of a paragraph, the narrator notes the age disparity between herself and Bond, and she emphasizes her own vulnerability as “a young girl, storm-drenched and storm-scared and lonely and confused” (*Band of Angels*, 135). Though Warren does not specifically address the question of consent, which as a slave Amantha had no right to grant or withhold, her first sexual experience with Bond underscores the vast power disparity between them. Even from this initial episode, which lacks the physical force of subsequent encounters, Bond and Amantha’s relationship cannot credibly be read as anything other than sexual exploitation. When Amantha wakes the next morning, she experiences a “stir of memory, a flash of terror, a sense of violation,” a delayed reaction, says the narrator (*Band of Angels*, 135). In her panic, she pulls herself free of Bond and stands by the bed, but surveying the room, she sees the scar on his leg—the reason he walks with a limp—and from motives the narrator still does not understand after a lifetime of reflection, she leans and kisses the scar.

Both Lucy Ferriss and Margaret Jordan, in her chapter “What Made Amantha Lean?” take to task earlier critics who refuse to acknowledge the coercive and exploitative nature of the episode and who read Amantha’s kiss as evidence of her complicity. Both Ferriss and Jordan rightly suggest that Amantha acts from the complicated emotional response of someone who has just been raped.<sup>55</sup> The nature of Amantha’s relationship to Bond is further complicated by his continued willingness to send her Cincinnati. He accompanies her part way on the steamboat and disembarks at his plantation Pointe du Loop, where he gives her an envelope with emancipation papers and money. He instructs her to “forget everything. Everything that’s ever happened. Forget me,” then disappears down the stairs and out of sight (*Band of Angels*, 138). “I was not responsible for what was to happen,” says the narrator,

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<sup>54</sup> The night of the storm, Hamish Bond also speaks the name Manty, but unlike the pleasantness of that first utterance, this time, it is spoken as an unnatural groan.

<sup>55</sup> Lucy Ferriss, *Sleeping With the Boss*, 122; Margaret Jordan, *African American Servitude and Historical Imaginings*, 75-76.

much as she describes her earlier escape attempts. “I had made no decision for the act; it surprised me. I found myself, still clutching the envelope, dashing down the stairs.” For the second time in two days, Amantha fails to reach her destination, freedom. She forfeits the opportunity to travel back to Cincinnati—notably the locale of her father’s death—for a life of concubinage. One of the most baffling aspects of Warren’s novel is Amantha’s tendency to deny that she exercises any conscious will in her own actions, while at other times, she accepts blame for events that she clearly does not control; but like her preparations for the thwarted hanging and her runaway attempt the day of the auction, Amantha denies any volition in the act of remaining a slave.

That Amantha follows Bond down the gangplank rather than continuing north to freedom is deeply perplexing. The narrator seems to have no more insight into her motivation for staying with Bond than for her reaction to his scar. Both actions seem to have contributed to critics’ refusal to recognize the coercive nature of Amantha and Bond’s sexual relationship.<sup>56</sup> In his 1955 review for the *The New York Times*, Orville Prescott wrote, “Amantha became [Bond’s] mistress and when offered her freedom chose to remain with the master she had learned to love.”<sup>57</sup> While Prescott grossly misreads and misrepresents the master-slave relationship, Margaret Jordan more aptly suggests that “Amantha does not and probably cannot really confront the rape issue herself, but very clearly sees herself as a victim of almost everything and everyone else.” In trying to interpret Amantha’s actions under such circumstances, Jordan rightly stresses “the vulnerability and absence of choices for someone in her position.”<sup>58</sup>

Despite what she clearly reads as a sexual assault by Bond, Margaret Jordan curiously finds *Band of Angels* devoid of any critique of slavery. “Because the text is set in the deep

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<sup>56</sup> Jordan, *African American Servitude and Historical Imaginings*, 79.

<sup>57</sup> Orville Prescott, “Books of the Times.”

<sup>58</sup> Jordan, *African American Servitude and Historical Imaginings*, 79.

slaveholding South and the narrator is sold into sexual slavery,” she writes, “one might reasonably anticipate, if not an indictment, then at least a critique of slavery, perhaps? Or a critique of the sexual exploitation of slave women, perhaps? Not so for *Band of Angels*.”<sup>59</sup> Contrary to Jordan’s claim, *Band of Angels* does offer an indictment of slavery by exposing the violence on which this supposedly paternal institution was predicated. Amantha’s sexual exploitation is the critique of slavery. Through a series of assaults and attempted assaults, the “kind” slaveholder Hamish Bond reveals his brutality. Much of the criticism of *Band of Angels* rests on the misunderstood phrase “kindness like a disease,” which is not—as some critics suppose—an affirmation of Bond’s kindness. Though her initial utterance remains somewhat oblique, Michelle’s claim that Bond has kindness “as a man might have a long disease” suggests it as an ailment, a sickness, something harmful and unhealthy. The phrase derives its full meaning from the circumstances of Bond’s repeated sexual assault.

### **Kindness Like a Disease**

In *All the King’s Men*, due to his affair and Duncan Trice’s death, Cass Mastern feels himself complicit in Phebe’s sale, which he fears will result in her sexual exploitation. In *Brother to Dragons*, before he murders and dismembers the slave George, Thomas Jefferson’s nephew Lilburne Lewis rapes his wife. While *All the King’s Men* portrays the sexual exploitation of slave women as one of the worst aspects of slavery, *Brother to Dragons* suggests a pattern of depraved violence on the part of the slaveholder that manifests first in spousal rape, then in literal butchery of the slave George. In *Band of Angels*, the instances of sexual violence against women, especially Amantha during her enslavement, are more numerous and sometimes more explicit than in Warren’s earlier works. Through these acts of sexual coercion, supposedly decent men reveal their moral depravity and brutality, especially the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 41.



“kind” slaveholder Hamish Bond.

The archetype for Warren’s sexual-coercion-as-moral-corruption argument is the disgraced Oberlin postmaster. While the young woman whom Taylor “lured into concubinage” would have been a free servant, the term concubinage evokes sexual servitude and, thus, exploitation that resembles the power dynamic, if not the exact legal definition, of Bond and Amantha’s relationship. Taylor, who had acted as the moral authority in the Horace Norton affair reveals his iniquity in the exploitation of the young concubine.

Following Louisiana’s vote for secession, the man Amantha knows as Bond’s cousin confirms Seth Parton’s warning about the deception of slaveholders. Once beyond the jurisdiction of U.S. laws prohibiting slave importation, Charles Prieur-Denis engages in the international slave trade and arrives at Ponte du Loup with a boatload of bondspeople. On previous visits, Amantha spent time in Prieur-Denis’s company, receiving French and horseback riding lessons. When he reappears, not as the Southern aristocrat but as the international slave trader, Prieur-Denis attempts to sexually assault Amantha while Bond is away at another plantation. Rau-Ru interrupts the assault and strikes Prieur-Denis, who evokes the legal penalties for a slave who strikes a white man; he also reminds Rau-Ru that Amantha cannot testify on his behalf because she, too, is a slave. Prieur-Denis’s conduct, so incongruous with his earlier attentions toward Amantha, starkly illustrates the power disparity between a free white man who can assault a slave virtually without consequence and the slaves who have no legal right to defend themselves or each other against assault. Rau-Ru responds by knocking Prieur-Denis unconscious and running out of the house. He is apprehended nearby and taken to jail, where he is flogged for resistance and then kills a man in the process of escape.

The Prieur-Denis episode is a prelude to revelations by Hamish Bond that ascribe full meaning to the phrase “kindness like a disease.” Though the pattern of repetition is not limited to Hamish Bond and Amantha Starr, their relationship becomes the focal point of a phenomenon Warren would later

describe as “neurotic automatism,” in which the participants, unable to confront an earlier trauma or their own culpability, are “doomed to reenact” the past.<sup>60</sup> As residents torch their cotton stores and loot businesses in anticipation of the Federal occupation, Bond and Amantha stay in her old room in the New Orleans house for the first time since their sexual relationship began. Much as the storm reenacted the harrowing episode of Amantha’s childhood, the mob violence that escalates into the late hours also conjures old memories and elicits the story of Bond’s mysterious past. Bond’s recollection that he had slept upstairs during the yellow fever epidemic prompts Amantha to repeat the observation that he “had kindness like a disease.” When Bond replies, “You don’t even know who I am,” Amantha protests that she does know and declares “you are kind!” but his confession, which culminates in sexual violence toward Amantha, reveals the sinister nature that lies beneath the facade of “kindness like a disease.”

Hamish Bond is not the true name of the man who owns Amantha but the identity he invented after making his fortune as a slave trader. Hamish was the name of a captain who tried to cheat him out of his wages. Bond, whose real name is Alec Hinks, stole Hamish’s ship and later took his name. Bond was the surname of Prieur-Denis’s American relatives. Hinks assumed the name so he could settle in New Orleans as a distant cousin from South Carolina. Bond tells of his boyhood in Baltimore and how he entered the slave trade as a perverse fulfillment of his mother’s obsession with slaveowning. She claimed to be from a prominent family in South Carolina who were dispossessed of their property during the Revolution. Her professional aspirations for young Alec were that he would make a fortune and return his mother to her family’s earlier social position, which she apparently measured by the number of slaves she owned. Alec learned to despise his mother and finally declared his belief that she had lied about her family’s vast slaveholding. He resolved to defy his mother by giving her exactly what she wanted in excess and joined crew of a slave ship.

Bond’s account of the slave trade affirms the horrific stories Amantha heard as a student at

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 58-59.

Oberlin, including the account of slaves who swallow their tongues—a specific “liability” Bond attributes to Eboe slaves kidnapped from the Blight of Benin. Before he acquired his own ship, Bond was a crewman on a frigate called *Defiance*. It carried 625 slaves, who were “jammed on the slave decks, down in the hold, lying on the right side, one fellow’s kneecaps jammed into the next fellow’s hamstrings, spoon-wise.” Some of the women were kept on deck at night, where they were sexually abused by the crew, including Bond (*Band of Angels*, 187). He also spent time on a ship where the conditions were apparently so bad he vowed never to work on another like it. “I swore when I got my ship, I’d run it clean,” says Bond, who explains how, as a supposedly upstanding slave trader, he packed his human cargo with room to turn on the shelves, had them taken up on deck for “air and dancing,” and “hosed ‘em down with sea water.” He relates with appalling pride how he had the slave decks cleaned, attended to the slaves’ oral hygiene, fed his captives the same rations as the crew, and never lost money. While he claims his protocols prevented the foul stench that notoriously suffused other slave ships, his assertion that, “My ship didn’t smell,” also suggests a belief that these apparently exceptional measures somehow rendered his ship and its enterprise less morally offensive.

The night that seems to Bond so like the rampage of the New Orleans mobs began when he needed to fill three ships but could acquire no slaves. The warring season, in which captives were stolen for the slave trade had not begun, so Bond appealed to a king to launch an early raid. As the king’s warriors waged a surprise attack, Bond stood in the middle of the village and watched them torch houses and then shoot, club, and razor the victims who ran outside. Describing a slaughter that destroys his persona as the “kind” slaveholder, Bond tells how the attackers carried out their “razor-work” and “cracked open heads,” then soaked their garments and “plastered” their gun stocks with the blood of their victims. Bond does not actually execute the violence he initiated; he merely watches the carnage unfold and tries to deny his own responsibility, saying to himself, “*This is not me. ... They drove me to it*” (*Band of Angels*, 197). As the warriors sorted through the piles of bodies, they

discovered a mother and a newborn baby, both still alive. According to Bond, the warriors “dragged the mother a couple of feet and carved her.” As they moved to kill the baby, Bond intervened and caught a razor-knife in the right leg but managed to end the attack and save the infant, who was Rau-Ru.

As he tells the story, Bond repeatedly denies any culpability and not just in the village raid that, by his own account, he initiated. Of the actual buying and selling of human beings, Bond recalls how he told himself that he “didn’t make the world that way.” While he participated and profited from the trade, he rationalized his part with the claim that the warfare, with all its violence, had been going on “a million years.” He also speculates that if a British cruiser liberated a cargo of slaves, the same people would “be sold again in a week.” He justified his business with the argument that “if you took one of ’em off to pick cotton five thousand miles away, you did him a favor.” While engaged in the slave trade, Bond resorted to the same excuse he told himself as he stood in the middle of the village and watched the killing and destruction he had instigated: “I can’t help what I am doing. They drove me to it” (*Band of Angels*, 189). Later, as he prepared to quit the trade, Bond acknowledged that it would continue to thrive in his absence, as “nothing I did would change things on the Coast” (*Band of Angels*, 198). He assumes no responsibility for his participation and claims the trade is driven by forces beyond his control. This contradicts basic common sense and Bond’s own narrative. By his account, he dances for two hours to gain favor with the king, whom Bond alone convinces to launch the early raid so that Bond can fill his ships with slaves.

What Bond witnessed in that village—what he, in fact, orchestrated—affected him in a way that his earlier human trafficking had not. When he decided to quit the slave trade, Bond—then, still Alec Hinks—sold one of his ships to Charles Prieur-Denis, who later came into an inheritance and returned to New Orleans. With the threat of revealing his slave dealings, Hinks blackmailed Prieur-Denis into helping him settle in New Orleans as a planter cousin, Hamish Bond. Bond assumes a new identity for the same reason Prieur-Denis fears being exposed. As Bond says, “Slave-trading is not respectable. It is

just respectable to own them. The more you own the more respectable” (*Band of Angels*, 199). Bond adds that he has been respectable for a long time and that he has tried to treat his slaves well; to his knowledge, the only one who ever hated him was Rau-Ru, the baby he rescued and claims to have raised like a son. With his extreme aversion to accountability, Bond fails to consider that he is directly responsible for the destruction of Rau-Ru’s village, the murder of his mother, and a lifetime of enslavement.

Not only is Hamish Bond not who he claims to be in name, his confession unmasks a character completely at odds with his persona of the benevolent slaveholder. As Alec Hinks, he perpetrated the very humanitarian crimes Amantha learned about at Oberlin. While Bond’s discipline as a slaveholder is reputed to be lax, that reputation, indeed the entire identity Bond constructs for himself as a New Orleans planter, conceals his participation in the slave trade and his culpability for the massacre he alone incited. The entire confession reveals that behind the guise of “respectability” and paternalism, slavery is an institution predicated on extreme violence.

After Bond confesses to his part in the slave trade, Amantha presses him to expound on what she had previously learned from Michele. Amantha learns that Michele was formerly Bond’s concubine, until he decided to marry and offered to set her free. Michele refused to leave, and married the slave Jimmee. Speaking of his former fiancé Bond says,

I did that girl a wrong... what they say is the worst wrong you can do a nice, young, respectable, Catholic, priest-loving, beautiful, aristocratic Creole girl, and I did it to her the first chance. She was cold as ice, and suffering like a martyr. But me, I was cold, too. I did it in cold blood. I was cold as arithmetic, and I did it like I was doing sums. It was something it looked like I had to do, to wind up some business. It was like a revenge. But I don’t know for what. She had never done anything to me (*Band of Angels*, 201).

The “wrong” to which Bond confesses is not entirely clear. He notes that afterward he refused to marry the woman, and she joined a convent. His evasive language suggests Bond may view the broken engagement as a case of seduction and abandonment, though readers may reasonably infer that Bond

raped his fiancé. At the very least, the relationship with his fiancé fits a larger pattern of misogyny and, in all likelihood, violence against women.

Once his confession dispels the illusion of Bond's kindness, Amantha takes a different view of Bond and her enslavement. She recalls with sudden clarity how the uncertainty of her role in the household made the early days of her enslavement an emotional torment. When Bond is unable to explain why he bought Amantha, she contests the benevolence she defended at the start of the confession. She declares that Bond tortured her with his kindness by making her wonder if she could be free and what would happen if she tried to escape. Each day, Amantha says, she "felt more caught and desperate." Spitefully, she tells Bond, "I wish you had beat me. Till the blood came. Then I would have known what to feel." Bonds protests that as soon as he knew her true feelings, he had made arrangements to send her North; he had planned to set her free. "Free!" Amantha cries, venting "some unknown, deeper anguish." He had only planned to set her free, after it was "too late." Exactly what was too late, she doesn't know. At that moment, says the narrator, "I just knew the upsurge of the anguish" (*Band of Angels*, 202). Of what happens next, the narrator gives the following account:

I guess it was my jerking back that caused it. He seized me. He was kissing me, but it was like he hated me. I struggled against him. But then I stopped struggling, even though I knew I ought to keep struggling against what was so awful, all of a sudden, and degrading. He was rough with me, not like he had ever been before. I was extremely frightened. It was as though there was a confusion of the terrible things he had told me, burning and screams at night, but somehow I was wickedly involved in it, making it come true. But I was extremely frightened. I cried out I was so frightened (*Band of Angels*, 202).

In the room where Amantha's concubinage began during a storm that recalled a childhood terror, on a night that conjures a yellow fever epidemic and a slave trade massacre and the probable rape of a fiancé, Hamish Bond assaults Amantha. When she resists his advances, he reacts with more aggression than he has ever shown her before. As Margaret Jordan aptly writes, "Finally, with any pretense at romance and consideration stripped away, Amantha feels the full degradation and danger of her

situation as she had not been able to before.”<sup>61</sup> The circumstances leading up to that violence evokes his earlier transgressions so that the assault, which is “awful” and “degrading” and “frightening” also reenacts the depravity to which Bond has just confessed, as well as the first assault that occurred in the same room. Bond’s revelations and attack show his benevolence as a slaveholder to be as much of a façade as the persona of Hamish Bond. Just under the surface of Bond’s kindness lurks an alarming propensity for violence, especially toward women. The illusion of kindness is particularly detrimental because it obscures the true power dynamic of the master-slave relationship and diminishes the inclination toward resistance. “Kindness like a disease” comes to stand for the brutality of slavery and the deceptive myth of planter paternalism that Warren’s contemporary, MacKinlay Kantor upheld in *Andersonville*.

After that night, the household dynamic becomes “a strange parody of the early times in the house” when Amantha had hoped and planned for her escape (*Band of Angels*, 214). At night, Amantha lies in her room with the door locked, “afraid,” unable to state the object of her fear. She would “remember what happened on this bed,” and “be filled with...shivering shame and defilement” (*Band of Angels*, 215). As Warren makes evident the exploitative nature of her bondage, Amantha and Bond engage in yet another reenactment when Bond again attempts to assault Amantha. “I said, don’t, and I told him not to, please not, but it didn’t do any good,” says the narrator, who was “quite literally, terrified of what he was doing.” Amantha stops the assault with an accusation that highlights the master’s extreme power over his legal chattel but that is also an alarming expression of Amantha’s racism. “Oh, I know,” she cries, “I know—it’s just you want to make a nigger me—that’s what you want—a nigger—a nigger—like those niggers you had, off yonder in Africa—oh, you want to make me filthy like them!” (*Band of Angels*, 215). At this point, as Margaret Jordan explains, Amantha “finally realizes that in Bond’s eyes she has no function different from that of the African women on

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 80.

his slave ships.”<sup>62</sup> The excited utterance implies that Bond’s abuse is degrading not only in and of itself, but also because it imposes on Amantha a racial identity she fervently rejects. The appalling implication is that Amantha does not object to the rape of black women but to what she suggests as her racial transformation resulting from sexual violence. Soon afterward, Bond informs Amantha she must leave the house and gives her the manumission papers he had drawn up when he planned to send her to Cincinnati. Recalling the dollar Marmaduke gave Amantha before her sale, Bond gives her a bag of gold coins. Several months later, Bond tracks her down, asks her to return to his house and proposes marriage, but by that time, Amantha is already engaged.

The chronic recurrence that characterizes Amantha and Bond’s master-slave relationship and eventually Amantha’s life as a whole suggests what Warren, in *The Legacy of the Civil War*, describes as a compulsive repetition of trauma that results from the country’s inability to come to terms with its past. Only at the end of the novel, when Amantha finally reaches a resolution about her father, does Warren suggest an opportunity for Amantha to break out of the destructive cycle of repetition. That cycle is most apparent when each assault or attempted assault by Bond conjures and then compounds Amantha’s earlier trauma. Bond, meanwhile, proves incapable of accepting responsibility for his part in the slave trade or acknowledging that he is a sexual predator. Instead, he reenacts the same behavior again and again and again.

### **The Civil War in *Band of Angels***

Several months after Amantha is turned out by Bond, Seth Parton reenters the narrative as one of two officers who intervene when Federal soldiers harass Amantha in the street. When he learns of the courtship that develops between Amantha and his friend Tobias Sears, Seth demands that Amantha

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 81.



reveal her past to Tobias and says if she will not, Seth will inform Tobias himself. Amantha assumes that Seth refers to the fact that she was a slave. Seth's eagerness to disclose what he expects will end Tobias's association with Amantha makes the earlier hope that Seth would find and rescue Amantha from bondage seem all the more absurd. Instead of alienating Tobias, what Seth tells him compels Tobias to rush to Amantha, profess full sympathy for her ordeal, and propose marriage.

The return of Seth Parton inaugurates another cycle of repetition for Amantha. Shortly after her marriage, Idell Morton, formerly Muller, reappears, ostensibly married to a Union colonel. Aaron Starr's former mistress issues a veiled threat that Amantha had better keep quiet about Idell's sordid past, or Idell will divulge Amantha's personal history. Amantha is relieved that her husband already knows all from Seth, but particularly as he and Idell reenter Amantha's life, her enslavement and her multi-racial lineage are treated as a shameful secret. As a child of the 1850s and the literary product of the 1950s, Amantha has internalized an ideology of racial difference from which she never significantly deviates.

First with secession and again when Confederate defeat in New Orleans is imminent, Amantha expresses conflicted loyalties. Faced with impending war, Amantha fears "anything that might break the hypnotic and protective peace" she finds at Bond's plantation before she comes to understand the true nature of their relationship. At the same time, Amantha knows that many slaves suffer under brutal conditions, and she feels guilty for placing her own sense of security—which eventually proves false—above "any prospect of freedom" for people who are enslaved "where this easy rule of kindness like a disease did not prevail" (*Band of Angels*, 150). When Union forces bombard Confederate forts, Amantha is unsure whether she wants the Federals to prevail and admits, "The thought of their coming was a terrible fear for me, deeper than I could define for myself" (*Band of Angels*, 172). At the same time, she acknowledges, "my fear put a great field of crouching black people under the lash." Among them, Amantha sees the "accusing face of Old Shaddy" looking directly at her, and she begins to weep

because she feels “so alone, and trapped” (*Band of Angels*, 172).

In *Band of Angels*, Warren offers only a few accounts of battles or military affairs, but these episodes focus specifically on the role of African Americans in the war and on the relationship between ex-slaves and agents of the Federal government. An assault at Camp Lewis early in the war, rumored to have been led by Rau-Ru, demonstrates the militancy of the runaway slaves who stabbed a sentry, then fired into the quarters of the Confederate soldiers. At his request, Tobias assumes command of a black unit, for which he expects to be ostracized by his fellow officers. The narrator relates Tobias’s account of how, in an extraordinary demonstration of bravery, black troops charged the batteries at Fort Hudson six times (*Band of Angels*, 240). The battle account, along with the earlier acknowledgements of slave militancy strikes an important contrast to *Gone With the Wind*, which in 1936 portrayed black people in the Civil War only as manual laborers impressed by the Confederacy and as personal servants of Confederate officers.

In *Band of Angels*, Warren also tells the story of slaves who escape their masters and seek asylum with the Federal army. He depicts the arrival of a group of runaways seeking the safety of a federal encampment, where the enemies of Confederate masters hardly prove to be allies of the enslaved. Ordered to admit no escaped slaves within their lines, one of the sentries fires point-blank at a man who attempts to gain the protection of the Federal army. As the sentry recounts to his lieutenant that the last time he was on duty, the runaways “just came walking right over him,” more people begin to emerge from the woods. Tobias supposes that the people “simply up and walked away from some plantation” or, as sometimes happens, were driven off by masters who do not want to feed them but fully expect to reclaim them after the war (*Band of Angels*, 248). While the fugitives make their silent crossing in the moonlight, the sentry begins kicking the body of the man he fatally shot. Tobias tries to intervene, but touching the soldier’s arm sets off a “frenzy” of kicking, as the soldier screams, “Oh, the bastards, the bastards...the dirty black bastards!” For all the contrast in the authors’ representations of

slavery, Warren's account of slave contrabands embodies the same sense of bitter irony as MacKinlay Kantor's World War II dispatches. A man who has probably spent his life as a slave, who likely risked all to free himself, is shot only steps away from the Union camp that represents freedom. He is shot by a Union soldier, who then screams racist invectives and abuses the body of the man he killed. While told as a story of the Civil War era, the order of exclusion, the unwarranted deadly violence, and the inexplicable rage the sentry turns on his victim, might also be read as an allegory for the 1950s, particularly as Tobias reflects that freedom is "one thing a thousand proclamations can't do" (*Band of Angels*, 248).

Tobias's comment at the end of that story that, "You've just got one life... You'd like to make it mean something," inspires Amantha to become a teacher for the Freedman's Aid Society. Amantha's concept of racial identity changes little in the course of the novel, but in one important episode, a student confronts Amantha with a sense of the cruelty her racist attitudes perpetrate (*Band of Angels*, 248). As part of their morning routine, Amantha has her pupils hold out their palms so that she can inspect them for washing. One little girl proudly announces that she has also had her hair combed and nits removed. As the little girl takes Amantha's hand and presses it to her head, Amantha feels as if she might faint. "A nausea assailed me," recalls the narrator, who says she experienced "a frightful sense of defilement," not only of her hand but also "a crawling foulness on my scalp, a prickling of skin down my spine, a twitching revulsion to my last nerve-end." She shouts, "Don't touch me!" then jerks her hand away and stares at its whiteness. She notices then, that all of her students are staring at her, including the little girl, who is now sobbing. According the narrator, "I dropped to my knees by the child and embraced her desperately, saying, "Darling, darling," over and over again, while I kissed her over and over, pressing my desperate kisses against the skin of her face and against the coarse hair" (*Band of Angels*, 250). Amantha reacts to the child's touch from the same deeply ingrained racism that led her to reject her mother and refuse any identification with blackness. The little girl's tears reproach

Amantha for her conduct and demonstrate the emotional damage it inflicts on the child. The episode appears to have no permanent effect, however; Amantha continues to reject blackness as part of her identity.

### **Forget, Reprise, Repeat**

In the early years of Reconstruction, Amantha is beset again by the repetition of her past. When her encounter with the man she knew formerly as Rau-Ru occasions the two to reflect on their enslavement to Bond, Amantha minimizes the worst aspects of her experience. Contrary to Amantha's expectations, Rau-Ru, who has returned as Lt. Oliver Cromwell Jones, does not harbor a grudge against her for his capture and whipping but credits her with freeing him. If not for the incident with Charles Prieur-Denis, he might still be subservient to Bond as the k'la, a status Jones recalls with "a sweeping gesture of revulsion." As Bond explains the night he recounts the village raid, a k'la is "a kind of special slave...almost like a brother or son... It's the one when you die that dies with you. Maybe they kill him. ...A k'la, he's sort of like a part of you. He's sort of like another self" (*Band of Angels*, 200). The k'la, as Margaret Jordan explains, is "not considered a separate being in his own right, but merely an extension of the master's will and even consciousness."<sup>63</sup> Inexplicably, and except for an adjustment of verb tense, Amantha defends Bond with exactly the same words she used to defend her father at Oberlin. "But he was good," she says, as if forgetting how his kindness was a torture to her, how it masked a history of human trafficking, and how Bond sexually assaulted her and finally turned her out. Jones does not dispute that Bond was good but says the kindness is what makes him hate Bond the most. As Margaret Jordan suggests, Rau-Ru recognizes Bond's kindness as "a trap that disguises a true state of bondage." He presses Amantha to "admit the contradictions she feels for Bond because of his

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 95.

‘kindness,’” but the admission happens twenty years later at the grave of the man Amantha thinks is Rau-Ru.<sup>64</sup>

Amid this political unrest that precedes the New Orleans riot, Seth Parton, ill with fever, visits Amantha to relate his revised theory of sanctification. The married father of two now asserts that “only in vileness,” may one begin to seek “final joy.” Seth insists the two of them “must confirm what vileness has been enacted in [his] heart” (*Band of Angels*, 284). When Amantha rejects his proposition of adultery, Seth tries to coerce her into having sex by threatening to tell her husband that her mother and Amantha were slaves, the very facts she thought he had already imparted. Seth explains that he told Tobias about her father, “that he was of a libidinous nature, that there was a taint of immoral blood”; Seth did not know Amantha was a slave until he learned of it from Idell Morton (*Band of Angels*, 285). Seth’s concern with the doctrine of sanctification recalls the pair’s youthful trek to the woods. Instead of commanding Amantha to pray, Seth now insists their commission of adultery, for which he once condemned Aaron Starr, is a theological necessity for his spiritual attainment. Despite Seth’s stated preference “not to have to force” Amantha, his willingness to resort to coercion, though it does not escalate to physical assault, associates him with the likes of Charles Prieur-Denis and Hamish Bond. In their former acquaintance, Seth presented himself as a moral authority, not only on sexual temptation but on the evils slaveholding. While his youthful philosophy on the dangers of “good” masters bears out, particularly in the case of Hamish Bond, the older Seth’s attempt at sexual exploitation—using Amantha’s enslaved past to gain power over her—and even the fever that afflicts him at the time of his visit, suggest he has much in common with the postmaster Taylor and with the slaveholder who has “kindness like a disease.”

Later, when she tells Tobias what she thought he had known all along, Amantha’s account of her enslavement downplays Hamish Bond’s abuse. “I was bought by a man who was not a bad man,”

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 94.

she says “In one way, he did treat me like his slave, but he was kind to me” (*Band of Angels*, 290).

Much as she defended Bond to Rau-Ru, Amantha’s account mystifies Bond’s activities as a slave trader and his commission of sexual violence. Though Amantha was able to confront Bond about the torturous nature of even his kindest treatment, her conversations with Rau-Ru and Tobias suggest that she eventually reverts to the illusion of Bond’s paternalistic kindness, as though she is unable to truly confront the reality of her enslavement.

Later that night, as Tobias worries about the possible consequences of the Unionist Convention being convened, Amantha, sounding too much like Hamish Bond, implores, “let’s forget everything.” Tobias, however rushes out in what he believes is a last ditch effort to avert a backlash against the members of the convention. Despite the acceptance he espouses when she tells of her former enslavement, Amantha interprets Tobias’s unwillingness to ignore the political turmoil and stay with her as a rejection. Warren offers no reason beyond Amantha’s anxiety to think that Tobias acts from anything but a moral duty to try to stop a massacre. Nevertheless, with the intention of also leaving Tobias, Amantha goes to Rau-Ru’s apartment.

Recalling the mob violence four years earlier, when Hamish Bond confessed his past and assaulted Amantha, the New Orleans Riot is the setting for the perverse final chapter of Amantha and Bond’s relationship. Rau-Ru, decides to take revenge on Bond and makes preparations for a hanging, but before he can carry out the execution, Bond leaps to his death. Later, while stopped at the Boyd plantation, Rau-Ru claims he would not have placed Bond in that position and Bond would not have jumped, if not for Amantha’s presence (*Band of Angels*, 327, 329). He also implies that Amantha was somehow to blame for Prieur-Denis’s assault and the physical confrontation that led to Rau-Ru’s arrest and whipping (*Band of Angels*, 327). As Lucy Ferriss explains, “Manty did not make Rau-Ru kill Bond; nor did she make Prieur-Denis attack her; nor did she make Rau-Ru strike Prieur-Denis almost hard enough to kill him. Rau-Ru’s reasoning is skewed and manipulative.” Yet, Ferris concludes, Rau-

Ru “bullies” both Amantha and many of the novel’s critics, who accept Rau-Ru’s claims as a credible statement of Amantha’s culpability.<sup>65</sup> When the Boyd house is overtaken by bushwhackers, Amantha betrays Rau-Ru, with an exclamation the narrator says simply bursts out of her without premeditation: “I’m not nigger, I’m not nigger—I’m white, and he made me come—oh, he made me!” (*Band of Angels*, 332). Riding away from the Boyd house, Amantha hears gunshots that suggest the death of Rau-Ru. After the riot, Amantha learns that Tobias has been severely beaten and hospitalized and rushes to his side but never tells him that she walked out on their marriage.

### **The Great Betrayal**

In 1877, Tobias publishes *The Great Betrayal*, a scathing indictment of the materialism of the Gilded Age and the country’s abandonment of its core principles (*Band of Angels*, 342). According to Tobias, “the idea of Freedom had been betrayed,” and “Big Business” was the culprit. He said the Supreme Court had been packed by corporate lawyers, who protected the national debt and reinterpreted the Fourteenth Amendment to “placate the South.” Then, he charged, a deal was brokered with Southern Democrats to make Rutherford Hayes president in exchange for the withdrawal of Federal troops from the South, which “[handed] over the Negro to the planter’s mercy.” But all of this, Tobias argued, was “only a symptom, however heinous, of the Evil.” Citing the example of his fellow New Englanders, Tobias writes that men who had once “aspired to live for ... God...Good, Truth...Human Brotherhood, ... Progress...[and] Freedom,” had “fought a bloody war for the value of Ideas, but in victory, they had betrayed all to the Moloch of Thingism.” “We fought to save the Union,” Tobias declares, but having saved it, he asks, “have we lost our own soul?”

After enduring public scorn for *The Great Betrayal*, Tobias finds himself at the center of an

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<sup>65</sup> Ferriss, *Sleeping with the Boss*, 125-126.

equally public scandal for his affair with the wife of the “chief local apostle of Thingism.” Just before they are set to run away to Italy, Tobias ends the affair, and the mistress relates the story in a suicide note. She survives the attempt, but her husband publicizes the scandal both to expedite their divorce—which he wanted anyway—and to disgrace the author of *The Great Betrayal*, as though discrediting Tobias and his “fine ideals” meant that “Thingism was, somehow, justified after all” (*Band of Angels*, 344).

Tobias’s adultery, followed by his loss of idealism is foreshadowed by the narrator’s assessment that Tobias has “nobility like a disease” (*Band of Angels*, 225). For Amantha, the affair has disturbing implications beyond her husband’s infidelity. She renews her anxiety that what she still perceives as abandonment the night of the riot may have been motivated by Tobias’s “revulsion from a taint in my blood.” Questioning whether the “old reason, or reasons, for his flight” had “now been lived over again,” Amantha settles on “the chillingest thought of all,” that Tobias had not reenacted his flight but his reason for going to her, this time with another woman (*Band of Angels*, 345). Now convinced that she had meant nothing to Tobias but “the excuse for his magnanimity,” Amantha becomes acutely aware of the repetition of the events of her life. “Did I have to live on and on, and see everything repeated over and over again?” she thinks. “Was my life only that, a perpetual re-enactment of what you thought you could not bear, but which was, somehow, the very essence of what your life was?” (*Band of Angels*, 345).

Even before Tobias is publicly implicated, he confesses to Amantha, but “the reconciliation, which might have been joyful and renewing, was not” (*Band of Angels*, 346). To the narrator, it is merely “inevitable” (*Band of Angels*, 346). In novels of the Civil War era, marriage often serves as a metaphor for national politics. In *Band of Angels*, the inevitable reconciliation of Amantha and Tobias strikes a different tone from the one Kantor imagines five years later in *If the South Had Won the Civil War*.



The years that follow constitute a long period of decline for Amantha and Tobias. At his father's death, Tobias, the only child, is disinherited. The will of old Leonidas Sears states his belief that Tobias is "unaware of the obligation which wealth entails," a reference to *The Great Betrayal* (*Band of Angels*, 347). During these years, the Searses move farther and farther west, while Tobias fails as a business investor, an inventor, and a wheat farmer. When a former business partner reveals his knowledge of *The Great Betrayal* and accuses Tobias of hypocrisy for writing against "Thingism" when Tobias had access to wealth, Tobias renounces *The Great Betrayal* as "a foolish book" (*Band of Angels*, 348-349). By repudiating his former idealism, Tobias enacts the very process of moral decline he outlines in the book.

In further affirmation of the theory of *The Great Betrayal*, the narrator reports the obituary of Seth Parton, who had left his pious first wife and children for Idell, made a fortune speculating in the wheat market, and lived out the rest of his life in a mansion in Chicago. Once the novel's voice of moral righteousness, who had attempted to seduce and then exploit Amantha with his theological cant, Seth Parton apparently dies a more devoted "apostle of Thingism" than the husband of Tobias's mistress; ironically, the article also states the intention of Seth Parton's widow to found a school of Theology in Seth's name (*Band of Angels*, 352). By this time, the Searses have moved to Halesburg, Kansas, Tobias drinks too much, and the couple can barely pay the grocer's bill.

### **"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"**

A turning point for Amantha and Tobias occurs in 1888, when two strangers arrive in Halesburg, one a man Amantha thinks she recognizes as Rau-Ru, the other a Chicago entrepreneur

searching for his father.<sup>66</sup> After nearly stumbling over an elderly panhandler she believes is Rau-Ru, Amantha returns each day, looking for some confirmation of the man's identity. Indicating the otherness with which she continues to regard African Americans, the narrator notes that "members of that race" make up only a small part of the town's population. The black residents of Halesburg, consist of "a few families...with sober and menial occupations" and Uncle Slop, the town's trash collector. Regarded as something of a reprobate, he resides in a tin shack outside of town and is known for reeking of whiskey and garbage. He walks on an artificial limb, and though he claims to have had his leg "shot off by a Rebel cannonball," no one in town considers the claim credible.

A reversal of fortune for Uncle Slop that includes the recognition of his military service also proves liberating for Tobias and Amantha. As Tobias relates that Pinkerton detectives have contacted him about Uncle Slop, who may be the long-lost father of a Chicago client, Tobias demonstrates the degree to which he has grown cynical of his former ideals. He asks whether Uncle Slop finished hauling out the garbage and discerns that Amantha paid fifty cents for a job that was never finished. Tobias chastises his spouse for being careless with what seems a trivial amount of money and comments bitterly on the result of the abolition effort. "You have to pay that violet-scented son of Ethiopie and then get down on your knees and beg him," says Tobias. "It was for this we bled and died." He adds, with evident sarcasm, "Hooray for William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Able Lincoln and Me" (*Band of Angels*, 357).

After three weeks of secret daily visits by Amantha, the stranger she believes to be Rau-Ru is found dead by Tobias when he visits Uncle Slop's shack on legal business. Joshua Lounberry, of Chicago, is now convinced that Uncle Slop is indeed his father, Harry Lounberry, who earned a medal

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<sup>66</sup> Critics have largely dismissed the ending as a failure. Allen Shepherd, for instance, accused Warren of attempting to "carry off a black tragedy with a white joke." He wrote, "The ending is forced, hurried and derives from no logical or psychological precedent. Allen Shepherd, "Carrying Manty Home," *Four Quarters* 21, no.4 (May 1972): 107. See also Leslie Fiedler, "Romance in the Operatic Manner," 30; Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*, 246.

for “gallantry” at the battle of Chickamauga. Tobias goes to the shack to obtain Harry’s signature on an application for the back pension to which is military service entitles him. Asleep and “totally intoxicated,” Harry fails to notice his guest lying dead on a pallet. When Amantha asks what will be done with him, meaning the old stranger, Tobias, who relates the news of both men, answers in reference to Uncle Slop, “Send a chariot of fire...send a band of angels, translate him without death’s bitterness direct to Chicago” (*Band of Angels*, 361). The comment, from which the novel derives its title, evokes the Biblical story of the prophet Elijah, who ascends to heaven in a whirlwind, without first having to die; he is transported by a chariot of fire. In the slave spiritual, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” the story of Elijah is an allegory for escape from slavery. The lyrics of the song include the lines, “I looked over Jordan, and what did I see...A band of angels coming after me/ Coming for to carry me home.” The “band of angels” refers to workers for the Underground Railroad, the “sweet chariot” that will “swing low,” into southern slave states and convey runaway slaves north to freedom.<sup>67</sup> Despite Tobias’s satirical tone, the evocation of Second Kings ultimately suggests the story of the decline of Israel as an allegory for America’s own moral failings.

Clarifying that she actually meant to inquire about the other man, Amantha learns that he will be buried in Potter’s Field, where she visits his grave two days later. The gateposts for the iron fence surrounding the cemetery are each topped by a “decomposing angel,” an image that suggests the stranger’s fate as the opposite of that predicted for his host. The new grave is marked only by a scrap of paper tacked to a stake; scribbled in pencil are the words “Old man, colored, no name” (*Band of Angels*, 362). In *Band of Angels*, characters often claim multiple identities through the process of self-reinvention. In this case, however, the deceased has no discernible identity beyond the temporary record of his age and race.

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<sup>67</sup> “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” *Singer’s Library of Song: A Vocal Anthology of Masterworks and Folk Songs from the Medieval Era through the Twentieth Century*, Book Low, ed. Patrick M. Liebergen (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing, 2005), 143.

At the beginning of the novel, the question “Oh, who am I?” prefaces the recollection of Amantha playing at her mother’s gravesite; here, at the anonymous pauper’s grave, Amantha begins to confront her past and to articulate a more definite sense of her identity. She recalls all of the people who had failed to set her free, both in terms of legal manumission but also in the metaphysical sense, for as she stands at the grave, she feels that she is still not free and worries that she never will be. As she considers that “nobody had—set me free” Amantha is then struck by a terrifying thought: “*Nobody can set you free except yourself*” (*Band of Angels*, 363-364). She rejects the identity of “poor little Manty,” the child and the passive victim of circumstance. She admits that she could hate Hamish Bond for his kindness (*Band of Angels*, 362). What could be a moment of empowerment for Amantha becomes extremely problematic as she accepts culpability for Bond leaping to his death, Rau-Ru staying behind in the Boyd house to be shot by bushwhackers, and Tobias becoming a “a sad, sardonic slave of bottle and bitterness” and a “betrayal of women” (*Band of Angels*, 364). The sudden awareness of her own agency and volition, which Amantha has long denied, leads her to the opposite extreme, as she accepts blame to the point that she seems to absolve Bond, Rau-Ru, and Tobias of any responsibility for themselves. At the graveside of the man she thinks is Rau-Ru, Amantha succumbs to what Lucy Ferriss aptly characterizes as Rau-Ru’s “psychological bullying.”<sup>68</sup> Finally, with more perception, Amantha acknowledges that the man in the grave is not Rau-Ru but “just another old colored man, nameless with scars on his back from the old times of terror” (*Band of Angels*, 365). The scars, exposed by his tattered clothing, had made Amantha think the old man was Rau-Ru, though she had never actually seen Rau-Ru’s scars.

Later that evening, when Tobias returns home intoxicated with a black eye, he relates Joshua Lounberry’s reunion with his father and a dispute with the local hotel owner. After Tobias accompanies Joshua Lounberry to meet his father, he drives them back to town with father and son riding in the back

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<sup>68</sup> Ferriss, *Sleeping with the Boss*, 125-126.

of the rented surrey. Telling the story to Amantha, he supposes he created “a reasonable amount of humorous comment on Main Street as a Jehu to coons” and says he was not “above a certain embarrassment” (*Band of Angels*, 369). His racial vocabulary, his interpretation of the crowd’s response, and his discomfort with the apparent subversion of race and class customs all betray Tobias’s own racist attitudes. Yet as he casts himself not merely as a coachman but a “Jehu,” Tobias identifies with the Israelite king who drove his chariot “like a maniac” and who succeeded Elijah in his efforts to eradicate the worship of the false god Baal in Israel.<sup>69</sup> As with his earlier reference to Elijah’s ascension, Tobias evokes the Biblical book of Second Kings, which records the disobedience of the Israelites and their leaders, who habitually devote themselves to false gods, much as post-Civil War America, in the words of *The Great Betrayal*, “betrayed all to the Moloch of Thingism.” Though he slayed the followers of Baal, Jehu also eventually strayed from the path of God, a transgression perhaps comparable to Tobias’s denunciation of *The Great Betrayal*.

At the hotel where Joshua Lounberry has already prepaid an exorbitant fee for a room that amounts to a storage closet, the owner, Biggers, refuses to let Lounberry take his father inside for a bath. Joshua Lounberry asks for his bag to be sent down; Biggers replies that he should retrieve it himself. When Lounberry suggests the possibility of legal action, Biggers turns on Tobias and demands to know whether Tobias had encouraged Lounberry’s challenge. Tobias says no, but since the patron paid his bill in advance at twice the usual rate, in addition to a twenty dollar bribe, he supposes Lounberry should have his property. When Biggers calls Tobias “a no-good lawyer...and a drunkard to boot,” Lounberry’s expression conveys sympathy that Tobias must also suffer Biggers’s insult and verbal abuse. At that, Tobias takes the hotel owner to task. He tells Biggers that he “should feel honored to have Uncle Slop in the house” as Harry Lounberry has “been honored by the Government of the United States for gallantry in battle” while Biggers is well known to have been a bounty jumper

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<sup>69</sup> 2 Kings 9:20.

who moved west to avoid military service. If the people of Halesburg did not speak of the desertion, Tobias tells Biggers, “it was because he was rich,” the same reason his neighbors “agreed to keep silent on the fact that he had got his start with brothels along the railroad” (*Band of Angels*, 370). Biggers then punches Tobias, instigating a fight that results in the black eye Tobias bears as a “badge of honor,” (*Band of Angels* 371, 366). Afterward, Tobias and Joshua Lounberry share several drinks before administering a much needed bath to Harry.

After hearing the story, Amantha worries that she and Tobias may be ruined in Halesburg; if so, they will move again to another town. Adopting the same racist language employed by Biggers and by Tobias when he supposes how the crowd must have viewed him driving the surrey down Main Street, Amantha pities her husband for casting himself as the social equal of a black man, what she considers a degradation. In Amantha’s estimation, Tobias’s Civil War service was different. As the “liberator,” Tobias had “merely leaned down from his height” (*Band of Angels*, 372). On this day, she reflects, Tobias “in the last attempt to deny kinship with the coon, had struck out to defend the coon” (*Band of Angels*, 373).

Even as Amantha views Tobias’s defense of the Lounberrys as a humiliation to her husband, the redemption of Harry Lounberry reminds Amantha of her own father and how she hated him for his betrayal. She envies Joshua Lounberry, “not merely because he could honor his father, but because he could honor the father who had rejected him.” Perhaps she might learn from his example. As though the desire to honor her father leads to the epiphany, Amantha knows with certainty what Idell had told her years before but what Amantha, at the time, could not believe: Amantha’s father had loved her. In her earlier formulation of love and personal value, Amantha equated enslavement with being unloved; the realization of her father’s love thus liberates Amantha. What’s more, she realizes, “it was, in a funny, sad, confused, way, his very love for me which made my father leave me to be seized at his grave-side.” Aaron Pendleton Starr, could not bring himself to write the will or the manumission papers

that according to Amantha “declare[ed] me less than what he had me to believe I was, his true and beloved child” (*Band of Angels*, 373). He had sent her to school in Ohio and probably planned to keep her beyond the reach of the slave laws. He had not anticipated his death. “No,” Amantha realizes, “he hadn’t betrayed me” (*Band of Angels*, 374).

While Joshua Lounberry leads Amantha to this new paternal understanding, Tobias is invigorated by the day’s events. At dinner, he relates how Joshua Lounberry, “really Dr. Lounberry,” formerly “a teacher in some school for Negroes down South” is also an inventor, who recently developed a new hair curler. Hesitating over a question that reminds her of her own “crisp hair” and her “secret,” Amantha suddenly feels that “somehow I didn’t have to hesitate any more, I could just say it,” and asks her question plainly: “You mean to take the kinks out?” (*Band of Angels*, 374). The directness of her question, the ability to frankly discuss a topic that evokes her multi-racial ancestry signals a new sense of freedom born of Amantha’s insight about her father. In fact, Tobias explains, the invention is a “curler to put kinks in white folks’ hair.” Impressed with the novelty and cleverness of the invention, Tobias resurrects his old philosophy of entrepreneurship. As he speaks the old, familiar phrases Amantha expects to see an expression of the “sad, self-satire” on his face, but much to her surprise, he is smiling (*Band of Angels*, 374). Helping to redeem the decorated Civil War veteran Harry Lounberry and quite literally fighting for social justice restores Tobias’s sense of optimism. Inspired by Dr. Lounberry, Tobias rediscovers a sense of possibility for his own ingenuity.

As he goes outside to tend to his cast-off clothes, still airing from Harry Lounberry’s abode and bath, Amantha goes to his study and renews a ritual she stopped years earlier when Tobias ceased to endeavor. She lights the lamp, fills the inkwell, and prepares two pens (*Band of Angels*, 375). Tobias, though, feels too exuberant to work and asks Amantha to take a walk. Stating his belief that “It’s not too late, it’s only ten o’clock,” he asks if his wife thinks it is not too late, but in extending the invitation, he addresses her as “poor little Manty.” Rejecting the appellation that relegates her to

victimhood, Amantha reprimands Tobias even more assertively than she does when Tobias uses the same appellation while relating the day's events "Don't call me that...don't ever call me poor little Manty again!" (*Band of Angels*, 375). Addressing her as "Miss Manty," he restates the question, which applies as much to their lives and marriage as to the hour: "you don't think it's too late, do you?" In retrospect, the narrator supposes she answered that it was not too late but says it may have been impossible to answer with her "face pressed into his chest, and the tears running out of me with the awfulness of joy." In the end, Amantha finally experiences the elusive joy that had been promised her long ago. Tobias pats her on the back as he repeats, "darling, darling, darling," while the narrator concludes the narrative with the line, "That was what he said" (*Band of Angels*, 375).

Tobias's words of comfort are the same that Amantha spoke years earlier to her pupil in the contraband school, who touched Amantha's hand to her scalp and sobbed at Amantha's terrible reaction. The narrator also employs the phrase "That was what he said," earlier in the novel, after Tobias risks ostracism to command black troops but reveals his own prejudice with the declaration, "Those damned niggers better fight." Implying her sense of injury, the narrator repeats the epithet, "That was what he said: *niggers*" (*Band of Angels*, 242). With the language of the conclusion, Warren conjures two earlier incidents from the Civil War era in which Amantha and Tobias disclose their most injurious attitudes about race. Earlier instances of repetition, particularly involving Hamish Bond, establish a pattern of iniquity that refutes the kindness of slaveholders. The final narrative repetition of "darling, darling, darling" and "That was what he said," positively revises Tobias and Amantha's earlier offenses. Rather than inflicting injury, Tobias now offers comfort. Unlike the sobs she elicits from her pupil, Amantha's tears are tears of joy. If, as Amantha suggests, the difference between Tobias's military service and his defense of the Lounberrys is the difference between condescension and social equality, the latter ultimately liberates Tobias and Amantha from the cycles of traumatic repetition and cynicism. Even the symbolic scrubbing of Harry Lounberry not only redeems him from



the equally symbolic garbage shack, it also revises the incident teenage Amantha observes at the slave market; rather than buffing a “Memphis bargain” for a higher price and a life of enslavement, tribute is paid to a decorated veteran and black citizen. Not by coincidence does Warren make the catalyst of this transformation a former instructor. Of the two most significant episodes to challenge Amantha’s concepts of race, one involves an African American student who shows her the painful and destructive effect of her racism, the other involves an African American professor whose example of honoring his father leads Amantha to a liberating insight about her relationship with her own father and about her sense of selfhood. Warren dates the conclusion of the novel 1888, but the emphasis on schools and educational access—Amantha’s students at the Freedman’s school all want to learn because learning had been forbidden under slavery—and the question of access to accommodations at Biggers’s hotel situate *Band of Angels* squarely in 1955. As a commentary on the segregated America of the 1950s, the conclusion of the novel suggests a new opportunity to reverse the failures and betrayals that followed the Civil War. Harry Lounberry’s liberation from the garbage shack and his rightful compensation for service to his country suggests the possibility for national transformation through the pursuit of social justice.

In 1956, a year after *Band of Angels*, Warren published *Segregation: the South’s Inner Conflict*, in which he recounted interviews he conducted throughout the South, following the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The book concludes with a self-interview in which Warren says the problem for the South—meaning Southern whites—is not to “learn to live with the Negro” but to “learn to live with ourselves.” Warren explains, “I don’t think you can live with yourself when you are humiliating the man next to you.”<sup>70</sup> Though the conclusion of *Band of Angels* actually occurs outside of the South—notably in the state where the *Brown* case originated—Warren’s self-interview aptly conveys the significance of the hotel confrontation in *Band of Angels* and Tobias Sears’s reluctant

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<sup>70</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 63.

defense of the Lounberrys. As William Bedford Clark presciently summarizes Warren's position, "Systems of discrimination, social abuse, and inequity in many ways enslave the dominant group, and only to the extent we are prepared to embrace the subordinate *other* are we free to come into full expression of ourselves."<sup>71</sup> The fact that Warren does little or nothing to refute the notion of African American otherness is one of several significant problems with *Band of Angels*. Though it does not absolve the novel, compared with *Andersonville*, published just months earlier, *Band of Angels* does represent slavery as an institution premised on violence, not paternalism. The accounts of the domestic and international slave trades in *Band of Angels* anticipate scenes from *Roots*, while the degeneration of Tobias Sears from idealistic Union soldier to hard-drinking cynic suggests the subsequent apostasy of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain in Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*.

### ***The Legacy of the Civil War***

In 1961, Robert Penn Warren contemplated the significance of the Civil War in American life. Like Kantor's story, *The Legacy of the Civil War* reflects the Cold War context in which the centennial was observed. But just as their novels of 1955 offered contradictory accounts of slavery, *The Legacy of the Civil War* refutes the notion of historical inevitability that underlies Kantor's vision of national reunion. "The Civil War is, for the American imagination the great single event of our history," Warren writes in the opening lines of *The Legacy of the Civil War*. "Without too much wrenching," he asserts, "it may, in fact be said to *be* American history" (*Legacy*, 3). While the Revolution created a nation in concept, Warren argues the Civil War was a crucible that translated the "meaning of the [Founder's] vision" into actual experience. The Civil War, he argues, made America a nation (*Legacy*, 3-4). It also preserved the Union and abolished slavery, but "did little or nothing to abolish racism" (*Legacy*, 7).

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<sup>71</sup> William Bedford Clark, foreword to Warren, *Segregation*, ix.

Technology and production methods developed during the war fueled the growth of business and manufacturing and drove westward expansion. From the Civil War, the United States “learned how to mobilize, equip, and deploy enormous military forces.” The Civil War, says Warren, was the United States’ “secret school” for the First and Second World Wars. “In a sense,” writes Warren, the after-effects of the Civil War, “add up to the creation of the world power that America is today” (*Legacy*, 46). But, he acknowledges, the war also had its costs, in the loss of life, property, and “values which are incommensurable with the particular victory” (*Legacy*, 47, 50, 51).

In his discussion of Civil War memory, Warren explicates two regional narratives that dominate Civil War remembrance in the national imagination—what he terms the “Great Alibi” for the South and the “Treasury of Virtue” for the North. With the “Great Alibi,” better known as the Lost Cause, the South “explains, condones, and transmutes everything” (*Legacy*, 54). “Even now,” Warren writes, noting the persistence of the narrative, “any common lyncher becomes a defender of the Southern tradition, and any rabble-rouser the gallant leader of a thin gray line of heroes” (*Legacy*, 54-55). With the “Great Alibi,” the Southerner performs what Warren calls the “Big Medicine,” transforming “defeat into victory, defects into virtues” (*Legacy*, 54-55). According to Warren, the “most painful and costly consequences” of this deception concern the politics of race. The “Great Alibi” reduces the country’s deep racial divisions to the “the doom defined by history—by New England slavers, New England and Middlewestern Abolitionists, cotton, climate, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Wall Street, the Jews.” By its specious logic, the Great Alibi deflects any Southern culpability for slavery or the racism that endured well into the next century. Cast as a victim of historical forces beyond his or her control, the Southerner—by which Warren means the white Southerner—is rendered “guiltless” as “an innocent victim of a cosmic conspiracy” (*Legacy*, 55-56). Southerners refuse to alter their racist attitudes, Warrens charges, because they consider any such change “a treachery—to that City of the Soul which the historical Confederacy became, to the blood spilled in hopeless valor, to the dead fathers, and even

to the self” (*Legacy*, 56). Relating that legacy of the Civil War to the civil rights movement and the backlash against school integration, Warren asks, “Does the man who in relative safety of mob anonymity, stands howling vituperation at a little Negro girl being conducted into a school building, feel himself at one” with the soldiers of the Civil War? (*Legacy*, 57). Warren casts the “Great Alibi” as the South’s collective psychological disorder, by which its followers behave as though they are “trapped in History” and “doomed to an eternal effort without progress” (*Legacy*, 56). With a view of history that evokes the repetitive traumas of Amantha Starr, Warren writes, “The whole process of the Great Alibi resembles the neurotic automatism. The old trauma was so great that reality even now cannot be faced. The automatic repetition short-circuits clear perception and honest thinking. North as well as South (for the North has its own mechanism for evading reality), we all seem to be doomed to reenact, in painful automatism, the errors of our common past” (*Legacy*, 59).

In the Northern counterpart to the Great Alibi, what Warren terms the Treasury of Virtue, Northerners—meaning white Northerners—feel “redeemed” by the triumph of the Union and the abolition of slavery. They “rewrite history,” to cast themselves erroneously as champions of morality and liberators of slaves (*Legacy*, 59). “When one is happy in forgetfulness, the facts get forgotten,” charges Warren, who recites a litany of facts that belie the concept of the Northerner as noble emancipator (*Legacy*, 60). Warren specifically notes concessions offered to placate Southern slaveholders at the moment of national crisis. In the election of 1860, the platform of the Republican Party promised to protect slavery where it existed; after secession, Republicans were prepared to “guarantee slavery in the South as Bait for return to the Union.” Prefacing each fact with the phrase “It is forgotten,” Warren recalls the nearly unanimous Congressional vote of July 1861 that declared war would be waged only to preserve the Union, not to “interfere” with slavery. According to Warren, Northerners also forget that the Emancipation Proclamation was “limited and provisional,” that it abolished slavery only in seceded states that failed to return to the Union by the following January, that

the document met with public disapproval, that General Sherman was “violently opposed” to arming black troops, and that “racism was all too common in the liberating army.” Warren’s account of facts that the Treasury of Virtue has erased from Northern memories runs three full pages and concludes with the observation, “It is forgotten, in fact, that history is history” (*Legacy*, 63).

Despite all the refuting evidence, the Treasury of Virtue casts the Civil War “as a consciously undertaken crusade so full of righteousness,” that the surplus is expected to absolve the “descendants of the crusaders,” of their shortcomings “unto the present generation” (*Legacy*, 64). Feeling that they had “finished the work of virtue,” the crusaders, he says, grew complacent. In a restatement of the principles of the *The Great Betrayal*, Warren quotes Samuel Eliot Morison: “In the generation to come that region [New England] would no longer furnish the nation with teachers and men of letters, but with a mongrel breed of politicians, sired by abolition out of profiteering” (*Legacy*, 66). Warren condemns both the materialism of the Gilded Age and the “confused and aimless” Reconstruction that ended with the withdrawal Federal troops from the South in exchange for allowing Rutherford B. Hayes to become president. Warren terms that deal “the Big Sell-Out of 1876.” With his lexicon of Civil War memory—“the Great Alibi,” “the Big Medicine,” “the Treasury of Virtue,” “the Big Sell Out”—Warren derides Americans’ epic delusions about the Civil War. Seeking to explain the enduring appeal of the conflict, Warren deems the “Great Alibi” and the “Treasury of Virtue” “maiming liabilities we inherit from the Civil War.” He grants that both narratives contribute, though unjustifiably, to “the attraction the War holds for us.” Both narratives, “serve deep needs of poor human nature,” writes Warren, who warns that if Americans view the Civil War “without historical realism and self-criticism,” they are “merely compounding the old inherited delusions.” Americans “fear...to lose the comforting automatism of the Great Alibi or the Treasury of Virtue,” Warren says, “for if we lose them we may, at last find ourselves nakedly alone with the problems of our time and with ourselves” (*Legacy*, 75-76).

Toward the end of the essay, Warren turns to a question historians had debated for generations—was the Civil War inevitable? While MacKinlay Kantor advances a theory of inevitability with respect to national reunion and racism in America, Warren suggests how the entire question of inevitability serves a purpose similar to the “Great Alibi” and the “Treasury of Virtue.” If the war could have been avoided, then all participants share in the responsibility and “the guilt can be spread around” (*Legacy*, 96-97). Even though it “philosophically [contradicts] the determinism implicit in the Great Alibi,” the argument that the war was preventable appeals to Southerners, Warren argues, because it serves the same purpose, “the diminishing of guilt” (*Legacy*, 96-97). Northerners, meanwhile tend to argue that the war was inevitable. Early on, to Northerners “living under the bruising and bloody shock” of the war, belief in inevitability may have relieved them from “certain unpleasant speculations” about their own participation. It also may have justified the North’s “gesture of reconciliation.” In this view, “the Southerner had merely enacted his inevitable role, and might even be congratulated on having enacted it well.” In another interpretation, “the evil of the South made the Civil War *morally* inevitable, and the North was merely the bright surgical instrument in the hand of God, or History.” Warren notes that most versions of the inevitability theory share one common feature: “any of them may be invoked to demonstrate the blamelessness of the instrument in the hand of the surgeon,” and therefore offer the same exculpation as the “Treasury of Virtue.”

For Warren, the question of inevitability assumes a new urgency in the context of the Cold War. Reframing the question of Civil War inevitability in Cold War terms, he asks, “Does a society like the USSR, ‘closed in defense of evil institutions,’ create ‘moral differences far too profound to be solved by compromise’? If so, when do we start shooting?” Warren urges readers to reject narratives that deny historical responsibility by blaming everyone and no one. Contemplating what the Civil War could teach Americans about the Cold War crisis, Warren suggests two possibilities. “Can we, in fact, learn only that we are victims of nature and of history?” he asks. “Or can we learn that we make, or at least

have a hand in the making of our future?” (*Legacy*, 102). Warren’s readers could either resign themselves to the inevitability of nuclear war or recognize human volition as an alternative to predetermined atomic annihilation. Surely the second option held more appeal. Yet once readers affirmed that they did possess the ability to shape their own futures, the same logic applied to the Civil War meant the comforting fallacies of the “Great Alibi” and the “Treasury of Virtue” could not be sustained.

## Chapter 4

### Slavery, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s: *Jubilee* and the Journals of Margaret Walker

From 1961 to 1965, as the United States marked the hundredth anniversary of the Civil War, the country engaged in another internal struggle over freedom and citizenship. During these years of freedom rides, sit-ins, and voter's rights marches, activists pressed for equal rights regardless of color, and for the desegregation of schools and public facilities. In retaliation for their efforts, activists were harassed, jailed, attacked by mobs, beaten, and murdered by white supremacists. As the centennial and the civil rights movement coincided, those who fought for equality and those who fought to preserve the South's racial caste system each had occasion to interpret their position through the cultural memory of the Civil War. Some segregationists in the states of the old Confederacy departed from the official national-unity-as-a-bulwark-against-Communism narrative by celebrating the C.S.A. as a symbol of defiance against the federal government and, thus, as a symbol of their own commitment to white supremacy.<sup>1</sup> African Americans framed the civil rights movement as a fight to fulfill the Civil War's still-unrealized promise of black freedom. The most famous oratory of Martin Luther King, Jr., often remembered for the refrain "I Have a Dream," began with an evocation of the "Gettysburg Address" and the assertion that one hundred years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans still were not free.<sup>2</sup> With imagery that linked the South's racist social policy to the bondage of the previous century, King declared, the "life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."<sup>3</sup> Within this national context, an English teacher from Mississippi worked to complete a novel based on her great-grandmother's life in

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 194-200.

<sup>2</sup> David W. Blight, *American Oracle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 236.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 217.



slavery and in the first years following emancipation. Inspired by Margaret Walker's family oral history, *Jubilee* exemplified the stories of slavery that the families of ex-bondspeople passed down in their oral traditions. In the midst of a centennial observance that largely omitted the emancipationist view of the Civil War, Walker clearly and succinctly framed the Civil War as a fight for the liberation of slaves. Her account of white supremacist violence against freedpeople in the postwar period also suggested parallels between the 1860s, when the latter part of the novel is set, and the 1960s, when Walker wrote the final chapters of *Jubilee*.

Margaret Walker began writing her family story as a college student in fall of 1934; she wrote the last words on April 9, 1965, the hundredth anniversary of Lee's surrender at Appomattox. When she later remarked that she had spent her entire life writing the novel, she meant it literally.<sup>4</sup> Margaret Walker learned of her ancestor through the stories told by her maternal grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier. Dozier's fictional counterpart in *Jubilee* is the sweet natured but relatively minor character of Minna. Vyry, the heroine of *Jubilee*, is based on Dozier's mother, Margaret Ware Brown. As a child, Walker was "enthralled" by her grandmother's stories of slave life. When her father dismissed the accounts as "tall tales," the author recalled, "Grandma grew indignant" and replied, "I'm not telling her tales; I'm telling her the naked truth."<sup>5</sup> Walker recognized the importance of her grandmother's stories and pressed Dozier to reveal as much as she knew about the family's experience during and after slavery. As the author later recalled, "I was already conceiving the story of *Jubilee* vaguely, and in my adolescence, while I was still hearing my grandmother tell old-slavery-time stories and incidents from her mother's life, I promised my grandmother that when I grew up I would write her mother's story."<sup>6</sup>

In her first attempt as a Northwestern undergraduate, Walker submitted drafts of the story as weekly

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Walker, "How I Wrote Jubilee," in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*, ed. Marryemma Graham (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 51, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Walker, "How I wrote Jubilee," 54.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 51.

assignments for her advanced composition class. The effort yielded approximately three hundred typewritten pages but dissatisfied Walker, who shifted her focus to a long poem she was writing for the same class. After working as a writer for the WPA in Chicago, Walker attended the University of Iowa, where she planned to write her novel to satisfy the requirements for a master's degree; in the end, she switched again to poetry. Her thesis, *For My People*, received the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. Twenty years later, she returned to Iowa and to the manuscript that, by then, had been relegated to a box in her bedroom closet. Walker completed *Jubilee* as her doctoral dissertation.<sup>7</sup> When it was published in September 1966, a reviewer from *The Chicago Defender* exclaimed, "Here is a novel that at last tells the truth about slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction," a novel that "refutes the lies and myths of such stories as *Gone With the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation*."<sup>8</sup>

Margaret Walker's decision to return to Iowa to complete her Ph.D. was partly a response to the dilemma she faced as a faculty member at Jackson State College during the civil rights movement. "I found myself in an untenable position in the early sixties," Walker explained in a 1982 interview. "My students were in revolt, and the administration was holding the line on segregation...If I sided with my students against the administration, I wouldn't have a job; and if I sided with the administration against the students, I wouldn't have anybody to teach." Walker chose a third option and enrolled in graduate school.<sup>9</sup> In a journal entry written shortly after she arrived in Iowa, Walker explained why she could no longer remain in Mississippi. "The pressures are crushing like iron hammers mashing human skulls—there is no hope, no mercy, no love and no redress," she wrote. Though Walker eventually returned to Jackson State College — now Jackson State University and home to a research center for African American history and culture that bears Walker's name — in 1961, that prospect was unthinkable.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 51, 52, 53, 57.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Pieter Romayn Feldman, "New Novel Tells Truth About Slavery—At Last," review of *Jubilee*, *The Chicago Defender*, Sep 3, 1966, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender.

<sup>9</sup> "A Mississippi Writer Talks," interview by John Griffin Jones, in Graham, *Conversations With Margaret Walker*, 88.

“Going back to JSC,” she wrote, “is like going back after intermission for the final act of a tragedy or an opera in which the Hero of Freedom is killed and the Despot on the throne of villainy, fearful that the end of his kingdom is coming, grows more and more tyrannical.”<sup>10</sup> Over the next few years, the quandary that compelled Walker to relocate to Iowa would recur in other aspects of her life. She longed to contribute to the civil rights movement, but she also had to weigh that desire and its potential consequences against her family responsibilities.

When Walker enrolled in her second graduate program, she was a married mother of four. Early on, she expressed concern about her ability to reconcile her marriage and her creative ambitions, which she felt had been deferred for too long.<sup>11</sup> To Walker, finishing her novel seemed the key to achieving all of her aspirations. “Am I right in believing or suspecting that once the Civil War novel is out of me completely and I am through fuming over it all my life’s purposes will fall into place[?]” she pondered.<sup>12</sup> The following January, she was mindful of how long the project had gone unrealized. “Every year I resolve to see the Civil War novel published,” she wrote, “and now we begin the second year of the Civil War centennial and the novel is still at stake.”<sup>13</sup>

In telling the story she inherited from her grandmother, Walker wanted to “set the record

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Walker, Journal 61, July – November 1961, p.31, Margaret Walker Personal Papers [AF012] Series II: Journal and Diary Material, Margaret Walker Center, Jackson State University, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,3572>.

<sup>11</sup> Walker writes, “About my marriage I am not out to destroy it and I do not want it to destroy me and all my creative talents. I believe Alex and I love each other but somewhere in our love there is a negative and destructive element. Not only have I become disorganized as a person but I have had a disintegration of morale. When I am with him the problems of money, housework, job and sex nearly inundate all my energies and I find myself fighting for my life as an artist. I sit up late and read and try to write but I find myself unable to cope with all these forces plus Alex. Then there is so much confusion, so much bickering, so much antagonism[,] so much conflict and so many death-dealing situations. I do not feel able to continue as things have been. I want to do what is best for all six and each one of the six of us—Marion deserves her college years without insecurity and inharmony. James deserves a better adolescence. Margaret and Sigis just need a chance to grow normally without constant confusion”; Margaret Walker, Journal 61, p.29, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,3584><http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,3584>.

<sup>12</sup> Walker, Journal 61, p. 9 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,3556>.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Walker, Journal 62, November 1961-February 1962, p.33, Margaret Walker Personal Papers [AF012], Series II: Journal and Dairy Material, Margaret Walker Center, Jackson State University, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,3720>.

straight were Black people are concerned in terms of the Civil War, of slavery, segregation and...Reconstruction.”<sup>14</sup> As a novelist, Walker considered her role comparable to that of a historian.<sup>15</sup> Before shifting to poetry as a master’s student, she was advised to read histories of the South and slavery, to “make a thorough study” of the experience of slave women, and to learn to use archival resources.<sup>16</sup> The result was a remarkable fictional account of slave culture, sexual politics, and resistance that challenged the paternalist stereotypes of *Gone With the Wind* and anticipated the next twenty years of academic scholarship. Scenes from Vry’s childhood and youth portray both interactions of a slave community and secret religious gatherings that double as abolition meetings. The brief history of Vry’s mother, Hetta, demonstrates the sexual and reproductive politics that distinguished slave women’s experience of bondage from that of slave men. *Jubilee* also explores the experience of a slave child whose master is her biological father.

From her review of popular and academic histories, Margaret Walker recognized that historical scholarship, like fiction, was a matter of subjective interpretation. In her research, she identified three major perspectives on slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction:

Southern historians claimed slavery was a beneficial system with benign masters; northerners did not oppose slavery as long as it was “contained” in the South and did not spread into the territories; while Negro historians regarded slavery as a cruel, inhuman system. White southerners claimed they fought a war between the states for independence; white northerners claimed it was a rebellion of the southerners against the Union, and Negroes said it was a war of liberation. White southerners claimed Reconstruction was the darkest page in history and a tragic era with Negro rule, while northerners blamed the troubles of that period on the death of Lincoln, on Andrew Johnson, and on ignorant Negroes and Congress. On the other hand, Negroes claimed it was an age of progress, with universal suffrage, land reform, and the first public school system. Then the Ku Klux Klan intimidated and disfranchised Negroes in the counterrevolution to reestablish white home rule. As for Negro rule, my authors reminded me that Negroes were never majority office holders in any state.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Poetry, History, and Humanism: An Interview with Margaret Walker, interview by Charles H. Rowell, in Graham, *Conversations with Margaret Walker* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Walker, “How I Wrote *Jubilee*,” 52.

In *Jubilee*, Walker narrates slavery from the perspective of the enslaved but also shows how planters' actions undermined their rhetoric of paternalism. Approximately a third of the way through the novel, Walker takes the unusual step of shifting her narrative away from her central character, Vyry. In the Civil War chapters, the white Duttons, who personify the Confederacy, die one by one, so that the demise of the Dutton family occurs in tandem with the death of the C.S.A. From the slaves' perspective, Walker clearly frames the Civil War as a war of emancipation. *Jubilee* demonstrates multiple interpretations of history, but its structure also suggests competing notions of what constituted a cultural trauma. For the enslaved, it was the cumulative losses and horrors they suffered in bondage; for their enslavers, it was the death of sons, spouses, and siblings in a war to preserve slavery, followed by the loss of property—including human property—in defeat.

When she began her research, all Walker knew about her great-grandfather was that he had been a well-to-do blacksmith, that he could read and write, and that he was born free. In a book by Carter Woodson, Walker discovered her family name, Ware, and a clue to the origin of her free black ancestors, who may have emigrated from the West Indies. In records of the Congressional investigation into the Ku Klux Klan's terror activities, Walker found an artisan with the surname Ware listed as one of the Klan's victims. In 1947, Walker visited her grandmother's birthplace, Dawson, Georgia, where she met a man who had known her great-grandfather. The acquaintance told Walker that Randall Ware had survived into his nineties and showed her what remained of Ware's home and business. His house, workshop, and grist mill stood intact, and Walker was able to see the tools her great-grandfather had used in his trade. When she returned six years later, the mill and smithy were gone, and a bus depot operated on the site. Walker hired a lawyer to research Ware's property records and was astonished to learn that he had completed several real estate transfers to prominent white citizens during Reconstruction. Her discovery that the blacksmith shop had been demolished came at the end of a trip

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 52-53.

that traced in reverse her family's journey from Dawson. She began in Greenville, Alabama, where she found her grandmother's last surviving sister. Walker's great-aunt corroborated Elvira Dozier's account of their mother and gave the author a picture of the woman whose life story inspired *Jubilee*. The aunt also showed Walker a family Bible and a chest that the elder Margaret carried with her when she left the plantation where she had been a slave.<sup>18</sup>

As Walker uncovered the missing pieces of her family's past, she also sought a broader understanding of that era. Planter records sourced several episodes in the novel that demonstrate the volatile relationships between masters, slaves, and overseers. Two incidents in *Jubilee*—a letter written to John Dutton by his overseer after slaves break into the smokehouse and the execution of two slaves convicted of poisoning their masters—are based on documents Walker found in the Nelson Tift papers at the University of North Carolina. Reprints of Civil War newspapers, probably issued for the centennial, contained articles about impressed munitions workers and runaway slave advertisements, which Walker also incorporated into *Jubilee*. For examples of how to construct a novel, Walker referred to the works of Chekhov and Tolstoy. She found *War and Peace* particularly relevant for its emphasis on class and nineteenth century warfare. She also consulted texts that contained the “strong folk flavor” she wanted to imbue in her own novel. For his “total concern with the Southern experience,” Margaret Walker reviewed the entire oeuvre of William Faulkner.<sup>19</sup> By the time she set out to finish *Jubilee*, Walker later recalled, “I had read piles of material, pored over documents, studied Civil War novels, read history books, and literally memorized books on the technique of the novel while also studying historical novels of English and American literature. In no novel had I read the substance of what I wanted to say.”<sup>20</sup> At a time when most academic historians still regarded slave

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 54, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 56, 63.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 57.

narratives as unreliable sources, Walker drew on slave testimony, including antebellum slave narratives. With these records, Walker authenticated the account she had been told by her grandmother, what she considered “the most valuable slave narrative of all...a precious, almost priceless, living document of my own”<sup>21</sup>

*Jubilee* began to take shape in 1948, when Walker wrote a comprehensive outline of the novel’s three main sections, including the major events of Vyry’s life. This draft also contained several of the chapter titles that appear in the book, some of which are phrases exactly as Elvira Dozier spoke them to her granddaughter. As she learned the art and technique of fiction writing, Walker wrote and rewrote the early chapters on slavery several times over three decades, but the 1948 outline remained the blueprint for the novel she eventually published in September 1966. She completed the Civil War and Reconstruction sections in a short period of regimented work from January to April 1965.<sup>22</sup> The final section follows Vyry and her family through their repeated attempts to establish a permanent home as free citizens. In these chapters, Walker often suggests continuities between Vyry’s experience of slavery and what she endures after emancipation. This final section builds to the return of Randall Ware and culminates in Vyry’s confrontation of her enslaved past. After the Civil War, Walker represents the psychological effect of Confederate loss in the unspecified illness of Vyry’s half-sister, the lone surviving white Dutton. Lillian Dutton takes refuge in a past that predates the war and her familial losses. Sometimes imagining herself a bride-to-be, other times believing herself a child, Lillian exhibits a mental regression like that of Gerald O’Hara, who in *Gone With the Wind* awaits the return of his dead wife. For Lillian, the losses of the war are thoroughly debilitating. Meanwhile, Vyry witnesses and endures multiple instances of slavery’s violence and experiences repeated

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 54, 59-61,

disappointments over the freedom she is continually denied. Vyry suffers bouts of depression, both as an adult slave and as a free woman, when the traumas of slavery are repeated during Reconstruction and the violence she associates with the slave regime is perpetrated within her immediate family. The incident, which prompts Vyry to recall her slave past, culminates in her revelation of physical scars.

For its rare depiction of slave experience, Victor P. Hass, a reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune*, found *Jubilee* “a novel of exceptional worth,” but Hass also worried that the book might suffer due to a national weariness about the Civil War, or as he put it, “nausea over that tiresome centennial.”<sup>23</sup> In a 1992 interview, Walker said *Jubilee* found an audience with both black and white readers, particularly in the South, but also related how racism influenced the novel’s reception and promotion. “My southern salesman said if I had been a white woman writing that book I would be a rich woman,” reported Walker, who also recalled that some stores refused to hold book signings when they learned the author of *Jubilee* was black. At one regional department store that did hold an autograph signing, Walker said, one of the store’s employees told her “she sold more of that book than she had sold of any book in twenty years.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Hetta and Her Child: Marriage, Kinship, and Sexual Politics of Slavery**

The antebellum chapters of *Jubilee*, collectively titled, “Sis Hetta’s Child,” underwent several revisions, but the novel always began the same way, with the death of Vyry’s mother. As the slave Hetta lies “waiting for her death in childbed,” her last request is to see her two-year-old daughter, Vyry, who must be carried two miles from another plantation to her mother’s bedside. The mother’s final

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<sup>23</sup> Victor P. Hass, “Don’t Give Up the South Yet,” review of *Jubilee*, by Margaret Walker, *Chicago Tribune*, Sept 25, 1966, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

<sup>24</sup> “An Interview with Margaret Walker Alexander,” interview by Kay Bonetti, in Graham, *Conversations with Margaret Walker*, 126.



moments occasion a stark account of slavery's sexual politics. Hetta's history is told first through the recollections of John Morris Dutton, the master who forced her to be his concubine from the time his father "gave him Hetta"—when Dutton was a teenager and Hetta was little more than a child.<sup>25</sup> Suggesting a racial binary that figured white women as asexual but encouraged the exploitation of black women, the father taught Dutton that it was "better" for his sexual initiation to come of "breaking in a young nigger wench than it was for him to spoil a pure white virgin girl" (*Jubilee*, 9). Later, when Dutton's wife learned of his slave concubine, she "pitched a lovely tantrum," hurled things at her husband, and packed to return to her parents. Dutton encouraged Salina to leave and offered to continue providing financial support on the condition that he would retain custody of the children. Salina stayed, but the marriage strained under their mutual enmity. In later chapters, Salina appears to derive sadistic pleasure from her cruelty toward Vyry, as though she tries to exact revenge on her husband by torturing the child of his adultery.

Though Hetta initially cried and pleaded to be left alone, the presumption that a master had absolute authority over his human chattel meant that Hetta had no power of refusal that Dutton felt bound to respect. Though Walker does not say so, the crime of rape against a slave did not exist in the antebellum South until shortly before the Civil War, and even then, it was considered a crime against the slaveowner for violating his property.<sup>26</sup> The master likewise held the power to determine slaves' partners.<sup>27</sup> Dutton exercises this authority by choosing a slave spouse for Hetta, apparently to conceal the true paternity of the children he conceived with her.

As Hetta lies dying, the husband, Jake, contemplates what her death will mean for his future,

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (1966; repr., Boston: Mariner Books, 1999), 8. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Jubilee*.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, And the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 68.

<sup>27</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 188.

when Dutton has “no further use for him.” Certain of his eventual sale, Jake recalls Hetta’s anger the first time she became pregnant with one of his children and his bitter realization that Hetta was the master’s concubine. Jake repeats the language of Dutton’s recollections almost verbatim as he reflects that “Marster had broke her in, and then ‘give her to me’” (*Jubilee*, 14). The two men are chillingly consistent in their use of the vulgar sexual euphemism. They couple the dehumanizing language of “breaking in” with the notion of one man “giving” Hetta to another for the purpose of sexual gratification.

Jake considers Hetta’s exploitation in terms of his own emasculation. He recalls returning from the fields to find Hetta in tears after Dutton’s visits, as well as his own encounters with Dutton. The master always “talked down to his slave, Jake, like he did to one of his good hound dogs,” but Jake never dared to challenge the master’s authority or attempted to intervene in Dutton’s visits to the slave quarters (*Jubilee*, 14). Concerning his dying spouse, Jake reflects that Hetta has been a “good wife” to him. He bases that estimation on her tidy housekeeping, the quality of her cooking, and the fact that she never denied him sex. Jake’s recollections also suggest the physical toll of Hetta’s constant childbearing, though he conveys this fact in terms of her physical attractiveness. He once found her “young and shapely,” but at twenty-nine, after fifteen pregnancies, with “flabby” breasts, a perpetually swollen belly and so many broken blood vessels in her legs that it hurts her to walk or stand, Jake finds Hetta “no longer young and slender and lovely.” He also recalls that in her youth, Hetta carried herself with pride, a quality he still finds evident in her face, which is “serene, dignified, sullen, and quiet by turns” (*Jubilee*, 15).

The entirety of Hetta’s life, including her grief over children who were stillborn or sold, is related through the recollections others, mostly through the memories of the man who owned her and the man to whom the master’s authority bound her in marriage. According to Jake, Hetta “rarely smiled and almost never talked” (*Jubilee*, 14). The only words of Hetta’s that the novel records are spoken to

Dutton when she tells him that she expects to die and asks to see her only remaining child. The novel offers no account of what Hetta thought and felt in the years of slavery. Yet that silence reflects the way Hetta endured her bondage. While men like Jake were forced to work in the fields for the benefit of the master, not only labor was expropriated from Hetta. Her body, her sexuality, her reproductive capacity, the children who were either sold or taken to be raised by the slave nurse, by law all belonged to Dutton. When Salina gave birth to a daughter around the time Vyry was born, Hetta nursed both babies. Both men recall tears from Hetta, a testament to grief, perhaps despair. They also relate what seems a near obsession with the cleanliness of the cabin and its occupants. Hetta demanded that Jake wash the sweat and grime of a day's fieldwork when he returned to their cabin at night. Dutton recalls being impressed that Hetta bathed twice a day but merely interprets her routine as a sign of diligence. As Walker never grants access to Hetta's interior thoughts, readers can only speculate on the significance of this regimen, but one can imagine the meticulous housekeeping and the twice-daily ablutions as Hetta's attempt to wash clean what the master defiled. Perhaps she also tried to cleanse herself of the emotions—possibly shame, probably powerlessness—that accounted for the tears Jake witnessed. For the little girl Vyry, who is held up for a last look by her dying mother, Hetta is the first of four maternal figures from whom Vyry is separated by death or sale.

The second chapter of *Jubilee* opens five years later with Mammy Sukey preparing seven-year-old Vyry to live and work in the big house. On previous visits, the man Vyry knows as Marse John was kind to her, and she found an adoring playmate in his daughter Lillian. Though she does not immediately learn the cause, Vyry already senses Salina's contempt, which makes her the target of her mistress's cruelty. On the day Mammy Sukey carries two-year-old Vyry to her mother's bedside, the big house cook Aunt Sally marvels at the physical similarity between Vyry and Lillian. She thinks, "They could pass for twins—same sandy hair, same gray-blue eyes, and same milk-white skin. One of them was Hetta's child and one of them was Big Missy Salina's. But they were both Marse John's and

there was no mistake about that” (*Jubilee*, 15). At first, Salina is delighted that her own daughter looks so much like Dutton. Then, Salina learns that Hetta has a child and sees for herself how much the girls resemble their father and each other. When a visitor from Savannah, who has no knowledge of Vyry’s parentage, commits the blunder of asking whether the girls are twins, Salina replies as if to suggest the absurdity of what is actually a reasonable inference. “Of course not,” she tells the woman, as she invokes a vulgar racial distinction, “Vyry’s Lillian’s nigger maid.” She also implies that Vyry is simply tolerated as a companion because Lillian has no other playmates. Though she concedes the girls are “near the same size,” Salina leaves her guest fumbling for an apology when she claims “never [to] have seen where they look alike at all” (*Jubilee*, 21).

In the Dutton family, only young Lillian openly acknowledges her kinship to Vyry. “In those early years,” writes Walker, “the little Missy did not mind saying to anyone, ‘Yes, Vyry’s my sister, and I love her dearly, and she loves me too’” (*Jubilee*, 21). After Vyry goes to work in the big house, the class disparity of the sisterly doubles becomes more and more pronounced. As she watches the slave Caline arrange Lillian’s hair, Vyry asks if she can have curls, too. Amused by the suggestion and oblivious to the sting of her reply, Lillian answers, “Niggers don’t wear curls, do they Caline?” In a subsequent scene, Vyry’s guardian Aunt Sally brushes Vyry’s hair into curls. Though the kindness pleases the little girl, it notably occurs only in the privacy of Sally’s cabin. In the big house, Vyry wears her hair wrapped in a head cloth. As Vyry’s duties do not allow her time to play during the day, Lillian steals away to the quarters in the evening to play with Vyry and the other slave children. A favorite game involves a song about courtship that concludes with the lines, “And choose the fairest/In the land./ The Fairest one that I can see,/Is come pretty maiden and walk with me” (*Jubilee*, 53). Until the day Salina appears and drags her daughter away, the children always choose Lillian as the “pretty maiden and the fairest in the land” (*Jubilee*, 53). These distinctions of beauty between two children who, we are repeatedly told, can pass for twins highlight the disparity in the sisters’ social positions.

One child will grow to be a belle while the other will become an exhausted slave who despairs that she might never know freedom.

### **Disease and Deadly Violence**

Vyry's move to the big house coincides with the return of overseer Ed Grimes from the Louisville slave market. Among the six slaves Grimes purchases is a sick boy who, after his release from the coffle, collapses and dies within two days. The arrival of an unspecified illness that Walker simply calls "the plague" amplifies the confusion of Vyry's first days in the big house. As Mammy Sukey cares for the sick, Vyry must learn her new duties without the help of her guardian. Twice on the third day, Vyry steals away to find Mammy Sukey in the quarantine cabin and is sent back to the big house with the threat of a whipping. Sensing that something is wrong, Vyry returns the next day, but through the locked door, Sukey instructs her not to come back unless she is sent by the cook, Aunt Sally. Against Sukey's orders, Vyry returns again the next morning, in time to witness Mammy Sukey's body being removed from the cabin. At the sight of it, Vyry "[begins] screaming and crying as if she could never stop." Vyry "crie[s] all day" but in the evening comes to understand that her guardian is truly gone and "hushe[s] her tears and determine[s] not to cry anymore" (*Jubilee*, 31). When John Dutton returns after a two-week absence, he is shocked to find six fresh graves sprinkled with lime and both Mammy Sukey and Granny Ticey among the dead (*Jubilee*, 36).

With its origins in the slave market and its transmission through the domestic slave trade, the contagion is symbolic of slavery itself. William Faulkner, whose entire oeuvre Walker reviewed as she prepared to write *Jubilee*, suggests a similar equation when he writes of the Civil War as "the fever

which had cured the disease.”<sup>28</sup> In Faulkner’s rendering, slavery is the metaphorical disease that sickens the South, but white southerners, confusing the ailment and remedy, mourn the loss of the Civil War and the end of slavery. Walker reinterprets and literalizes this disease metaphor with a fatal epidemic carried home on a slave coffin. Even as the illness ravages its victims, it does not affect the mistress, the overseer, or the absent planter. Every one of the casualties is a slave.

As “the plague” sweeps through the quarters, Vyry tries and fails to satisfy a mistress who seems to want to punish Vyry for Dutton’s infidelity. During her excursions to the sick cabin, Vyry forgets to empty Salina’s chamber pot; the mistress dashes the jar’s contents in the child’s face. When she accidentally breaks a china dish, Vyry worries that she will receive a whipping. Instead, Salina strings Vyry up in a dark closet with a leather strap until she loses consciousness. John Dutton, already stunned by the sight of the graves, is met by Lillian, who says she fears that Vyry, too, may be dead.

Despite such behavior, or perhaps because of it, Salina Dutton is well-respected by the overseer Ed Grimes, who judges that “she knows how to...act morally decent like a first-class lady” (*Jubilee*, 26). John Dutton spends much of his time traveling the countryside in pursuit of his ambition to hold political office. During his absence, Salina and Grimes embody the cruelties of the day-to-day labor regime. When an overworked mule drops dead in the heat, Grimes demands the use of Dutton’s prized thoroughbreds, one to send for a blacksmith, the other to replace the mule (*Jubilee*, 68). The elderly stable keeper Grandpa Tom refuses to turn over the horses. He insists that Grimes will work the master’s best horses to death and that he, Tom, will be punished for allowing it to happen. For challenging Grimes’s authority, the overseer lashes the old man with a bull whip until Tom is a “huddled and trembling lump of flesh.” Grimes kicks him, then draws his pistol and shoots Tom to death (*Jubilee*, 68). Grimes also overrides the master’s authority when he sends two elderly slaves, Uncle Plato and Uncle Esau, to work in the fields after Dutton tells the overseer and the old men that

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<sup>28</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 7.

they are exempt from field labor. Despite their infirmity and Dutton's instructions, Grimes orders the men to pick cotton. Recalling the fate of Grandpa Tom, Plato and Esau are afraid to refuse, but after less than an hour in the grueling heat, both men collapse in the fields. As other laborers tend to them, the work stoppage infuriates Grimes, who orders Plato and Esau to one of the empty slave cabins, ostensibly to recuperate. The houses in the slave quarters are undergoing repairs, but Grimes has also ordered the burning of some ramshackle cabins that are no longer occupied. What happens next, Grimes maintains is an accident. No one can be certain whether the cabin in which Plato and Esau lie sleeping is one that Grimes ordered burned, but by the time the mistake is discovered, attempts to extinguish the flames prove futile. Plato and Esau's cries for help turn to prayers as the two men burn alive.

### **Freedom Dream**

While Vryy's experience in the big house demonstrates the denial of biological kinship, her relationship with Aunt Sally reveals how social networks among slaves ameliorate the breakup of families. Following the death of Mammy Sukey, the plantation cook assumes responsibility for Vryy. After the brief disaster of living in the big house, Vryy works in the kitchen during the day and spends her nights in the cabin she shares with Aunt Sally.

With Sally, Vryy also attends the Rising Glory Church, an important site of slave community and resistance. Brother Ezekiel, the pastor who is later revealed to be an agent of the Underground Railroad, preaches from the story Exodus. Ezekiel relates the liberation of the Israelites from bondage in contemporary terms that render Pharaoh as the "cruel slave owner" and his palace as the "big house." Emphasizing God's displeasure over the persecution of his people, Ezekiel instructs his parishioners to "have faith in God and He would send them a Moses, a deliverer to free his people"

(*Jubilee*, 46). At first, Vyry listens “with wonder,” then begins to understand the truly subversive nature of the sermons and why Sally makes her promise not to ask questions or repeat anything she hears at the Rising Glory Church.

One meeting is prompted by two critical events: Sally’s son has a confrontation with the overseer, and a runaway slave is mutilated and killed by dogs. As an assembly of more than seven slaves, the meeting itself is an offense punishable by whipping. This meeting, however, is also attended by a white man and a free black man who carry abolitionist papers that have been smuggled into the state. These men report efforts to tighten Georgia’s slave laws, including calls to arrest anyone found to possess inflammatory abolitionist literature like *David Walker’s Appeal*. Much of the talk, which sounds to Vyry like plans for an insurrection, confuses the child. At this meeting, Vyry learns of the existence of abolitionists, whom Sally identifies as “friends to the black slave” (*Jubilee*, 49). The white man tells the slaves, “You are just as good as your masters and you will remain in bondage no longer than you are willing to fight and stop enduring all this inhuman treatment. Slaves are rising, all over the South they are rising up and there are other free men who are willing to help you. There are plenty of white people up North who will help you to escape, even give you money, and will protect you at the risk of their lives” (*Jubilee*, 51). Uncle Joe, one of the oldest slaves owned by Dutton, counsels that such talk is foolish, but younger slaves are willing to entertain the idea of “a fight for freedom” (*Jubilee*, 51).

Though Vyry does not fully comprehend what she hears, one of her favorite games is a play enactment of the baptism she will receive when she comes of age. Given the multipurpose instruction at the Rising Glory Church, readers cannot separate the child’s baptismal eagerness from her desire for freedom, which Vyry formulates as early as age ten. One morning, atop the appropriately named Baptist Hill, ten-year-old Vyry stops to appreciate the sunrise and the green fields of the Dutton plantation. She has been singing her favorite hymn, “Flee as a Bird to your Mountain.” As she looks



out over the land and sees a train moving in the distance, Vyry wishes she were a traveler. “If she were only free as a bird,” she thinks, “free as the mourning doves on the wing...it would be wonderful to go winging away on such a golden morning” (*Jubilee*, 39). The title of Vyry’s hymn doubles as the chapter title, while the first stanza provides the lyrical epigraph: “Flee as a bird to your mountain,/ Ye who are weary of sin./ Go to the clear flowing fountain, where you may wash and be clean.” While the printed verse evokes the spiritual cleansing of Vyry’s much anticipated baptism, the song also inspires a dream of flight that represents Vyry’s first recorded yearnings for freedom.

### **Power Negotiations**

As the ward and eventual successor of the plantation cook, Vyry spends most of her working hours in the kitchen. With its focus on Vyry’s culinary training, *Jubilee* joins other accounts of slavery that portray the politics of food and hunger as a measure of slaveholders’ cruelty and a site of slave resistance. As mistress, Salina carries keys to the cupboards and pantries as well as the smokehouse; the cane mill where syrup and molasses are produced; and the springhouse, where butter, milk, eggs, and leftovers are stored. In the summer, Salina supervises the house slaves in canning and preserving what has been “raised in abundance” or gathered from the woods, where fruits and berries grow “in wild profusion” (*Jubilee*, 41). As the mistress keeps the food under lock and key, however, it remains out of reach of the slaves who grow, gather and preserve it. “There was more than enough food in Marster’s larder,” Walker writes, but under the control of Salina Dutton, “none of this passed into the cabins and stomachs of her slaves unless they stole it” (*Jubilee*, 41). Eventually, Vyry recognizes the contrast that “even in the midst of plenty in the Big House there was want in the Quarters, and while Marster and Big Missy were feasting and rejoicing there was misery among the suffering slaves” (*Jubilee*, 59). In addition to the pain of hunger, the mistress inflicts another gastric torture by

administering ipecac to one of the kitchen slaves to induce vomiting. The mistress then inspects the stomach contents to ensure the woman has not consumed any of the jellies she has helped to preserve. Salina finds no evidence of theft but succeeds in a sadistic regulation of the food economy. After three days of being dosed with the emetic, the unfortunate woman can barely stomach any food at all (*Jubilee*, 130-131).

Despite the control Salina exercises over the kitchen and storehouses, Aunt Sally, as plantation cook, manages to consume the products of her own labor. Operating on the principle that she will not cook what she cannot eat, Sally stuffs what she can carry into various pockets and smuggles the treats back to her cabin, where she and Vyry “fill their stomachs full of good food” and chortle over their defiance of “Big Missy.” Slaves who lack the unique access of the head cook break into the main smokehouse and carry off most of its contents.

Someone also poisons one of Grimes’s hounds with powdered glass, presumably because it witnessed the smokehouse theft and might expose the culprit. A week later, one of Grimes’s daughters dies of no discernible cause. The next week, his wife miscarries. Shortly thereafter, his dogs find a small effigy of the little girl who died buried under the front steps. Asserting that his recent misfortune is the result of “evil witchcraft and black magic” by slaves, Grimes gives notice of his resignation, but Salina says quitting is exactly what the slaves want him to do (*Jubilee*, 67). Grimes’s superstition and his conversation with Salina attribute significant power to the Dutton slaves, namely the ability drive the overseer out of his job. Given his history of cruelty, the bondspeople have good reason to want the overseer gone. As the murder of Grandpa Tom occurs in the same chapter and shortly after the discovery of the doll, the beating and shooting Tom suffers may be Grimes’s retaliation for the bondspeople’s escalating resistance or simply an example of why the slaves try to force the overseer to leave. From secret church services that double as abolition meetings to the appropriation food and psychological warfare waged against the overseer, Walker represents a variety of ways, large small,

that slaves resisted the authority of the master, mistress, and overseer.

A more extreme act of slave resistance comes to light at the Duttons' dinner party, where neighbors discuss the case of two slaves accused of murdering their owners. Serving at the party affords the house slaves an opportunity to eavesdrop on the guests' conversations. As Walker reports, the slaves are most interested in discussions of news and politics. At this gathering, Walker offers the first reports of two slave cooks who poisoned three members of their master's family (*Jubilee*, 79). The women, who are eventually convicted of murder and sentenced to death, are accused of feeding the family toxic mushrooms. The case stirs anxiety among other slaveowners, who begin to recognize the potential for their own slaves to follow the cooks' example.

The night of the dinner, Salina persuades Dutton to sell their cook, Aunt Sally. By this time, Vyry feels such an attachment to Sally, "she could not imagine what her life would be without her." Vyry "[prays] fervently that Aunt Sally would not die like her own mother, Hetta, and Mammy Sukey had done. That would leave her all alone in the world" (*Jubilee*, 72). When fears over slave insurrection and cooks poisoning their masters leads to Sally's sale, her parting words to Vyry include a reminder to pray for a Moses. As Sally leaves, Vyry determines to go with her, but at that moment Salina "[slaps] her so hard she [sees] stars" (*Jubilee*, 84-85). Sally's departure is another major loss for Vyry, who, after disastrous results with other cooks, replaces Sally as the head of the Dutton kitchen.

Shortly after becoming cook, sixteen-year-old Vyry meets Randall Ware, a freeman who promises to buy her freedom if she agrees to marry him. When Vyry delivers a meal to the hired blacksmith, her presence startles Ware, who mistakes her for Lillian until he realizes she is dressed in the clothes of a slave. Their initial meeting introduces complex monetary and caste concerns. When Vyry rebuffs Ware's flirtations and makes it clear she has no interest in his company, he accuses her of thinking herself "too good for a black man" and chides her as "Miss Stuck-up" (*Jubilee*, 88). In one of the fastest marriage proposals on record, Ware tells Vyry that if she will marry him, he will buy her

freedom. As he jingles the coins in his pocket, Vyry declares that he doesn't have enough to buy her. Ware replies with an account of his larger fortune. The conversation plays out as a negotiation in which Vyry makes her marital consent contingent on becoming a free woman. But when Vyry demands, "Show me your money first, and talk to me later," Ware aptly points out that Vyry has no authority to accept or refuse his money or to make a contract for her sale (*Jubilee*, 88).

Randall Ware, a character based on the author's great-grandfather, introduces a historical reality that scholars had largely overlooked: The presence of free blacks in antebellum South. Walker accurately writes of the anxiety this small population generated among the planter class, for fear that they would foment rebellion among the enslaved. In reality, the close relationship that white slaveholders imagined between slaves and free blacks was largely an illusion born of their own anxiety. As Ira Berlin later explained in his 1974 study *Slaves Without Masters*, antebellum free blacks might succor "individual slaves to ease the burden of bondage" or aid in a slave's escape, but they did not typically incite the large-scale resistance imagined by slaveholders. While "their existence implicitly challenged slavery," Berlin explains, free blacks "were not a revolutionary caste," and other than Denmark Vesey, were "notably absent from slave rebellions."<sup>29</sup> Most free blacks, conscious of their precarious position in a slaveholding society, attempted to differentiate themselves from slaves and align themselves with the master class.<sup>30</sup>

Walker demonstrates her ancestor's tenuous position when she writes "the free black man was only slightly better off than the slaves." His "flimsy" legal status, akin to that of an indentured servant, required his affiliation with a white guardian (*Jubilee*, 92). A freeman was required to carry his free papers with him at all times and produce them upon request. These documents had to be renewed annually by paying an "exorbitant tax" that increased each year. The law also required him to buy a

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<sup>29</sup> Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 270.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 271.

permit when he traveled and to register in each county he entered. If Ware failed to comply with these conditions or if he were accused of a crime, his papers “could be taken from him and his freedom revoked” (*Jubilee*, 92).

Randall Ware was born free. He was literate and skilled as an artisan. Walker’s fictional incarnation moves to Georgia at the urging of his white benefactor, a Quaker Ware holds in such high esteem that he adopts the man’s given name as his own. Walker’s Ware is a far more subversive figure than the majority of free blacks Berlin describes. Ware, Randall Wheelwright, abolitionist Bob Qualls, and the slave preacher Ezekiel compose a local network of the Underground Railroad. Ware’s blacksmith shop often serves as a refuge for fugitive slaves. Though Walker does not say so explicitly, it follows that Ware is involved in the abolitionist meeting Vyry attends as a child, if he is not, in fact, the unnamed orator who reads *David Walker’s Appeal*. Vyry later learns from her fellow house slave Caline that Ware has been agitating among the bondspeople. Attempting to “get the slaves to rise up,” he tells the field hands that “he [knows] of a way they could all be free” (*Jubilee*, 96). “No matter what a white planter said,” writes Walker, “every slave craved freedom, and nobody knew this better than Randall Ware” (*Jubilee*, 93).

As much as Randall Ware claims to know freedom as the universal longing of every slave, his appeal to this sensibility in order to make Vyry his wife suggests an unsettling theme of marriage as a form of proprietorship. Ware calculates that in giving Vyry her freedom, he can “have her for his own” (*Jubilee*, 93). He repeats this suggestion when he assures himself that “he had enough to buy her” and that “His money had always been powerful enough to buy anything he wanted. Surely it would be powerful enough to buy the object of his heart’s dearest desire” (*Jubilee*, 93). When Ware offers Vyry freedom in exchange for marriage, their bargaining over the terms of the proposal replaces the rituals of courtship. The language of Ware’s subsequent self-assurances implies that on some level he considers her an object to be possessed.

Reprising the sisterly comparison she establishes early in the novel, Walker contrasts Dutton's denial of marriage and freedom for Vyry with an extravagant wedding for Lillian and the self-liberation efforts of Vyry's other half-sister, Lucy. Lillian's wedding day is a miserable one for Vyry, who spends it in a frenzy of food preparation and washing a "mountain" of dirty dishes (*Jubilee*, 116). By the time she finishes the cleanup, Vyry cannot say whether it is her head that aches so badly from fatigue, or her heart from "unhappiness" (*Jubilee*, 116). In the same chapter, Vyry witnesses the branding of her mother's daughter Lucy. The absence of this second biological half-sibling until late in the first section illustrates the lack of "any real feeling of kinship" between Vyry and the child of Jake and Hetta. Presumably an extension of their parents' complex relationships, Lucy and Vyry are, according to Walker, "too close in age and too inarticulate about their mutual sisterhood" to relate to each other as siblings (*Jubilee*, 111). As punishment for her failed runaway attempt, Lucy has the letter R burned into her cheek with a hot iron. When Lucy is feverish from the "running sore," Vyry worries that the wound might be fatal. Through physical and mental anguish of her punishment, Lucy also labors at Lillian's wedding. As she goes about her work, Vyry feels sorrier for Lucy than she has for anyone else in her life (*Jubilee*, 117).

The wedding is soon followed by the traditional Fourth of July barbecue, which is combined with the hanging of the two women convicted of murder. To make a public example of the condemned, all the masters in the county order their slaves to attend the hanging. Vyry, responsible for preparing the picnic, wonders out loud to the other house slaves how any of them would be able to "swallow over a hanging." The gathering illustrates the stratification of the community, as those who attend restrict their socializing to their own class. The day's program includes a singing of "Flee as a Bird to Your Mountain," the song Vyry sang on the morning she stood atop Baptist Hill and wished herself able to fly. The singing of the hymn at the public execution, and later at John Dutton's funeral, evokes that earlier scene of the little girl formulating her first yearnings for freedom; but the hymn's appropriation

by slaveholding authorities on the occasion of hanging two slave rebels, and later burying a master who reneges on his promise of manumission, only makes Vyry's dream of freedom seem unattainable to her.

Before the death sentence is carried out, a white minister preaches a sermon unlike anything Vyry has heard at the Rising Glory Church. Beginning to end, the sermon is a religious justification of slavery, which the minister claims is a "natural and righteous state," and the one God intended for bondspeople in his audience (*Jubilee*, 122-123). All through the proceedings, Vyry cannot bring herself to look at the two shackled women or their executioner. As the sentence is carried out, Vyry, shaking at the horror, buries her face in her hands and prays. In the crowd, black children scream and sob; some faint. The result of the day's events, writes Walker, is that the slaves are "frightened and sickened out of their wits" (*Jubilee*, 125).

While the rest of the household attends the gruesome public spectacle, Lucy takes the opportunity to run away for good. With the excuse that she is sick, she misses the Fourth of July gathering and leaves a dummy on her pallet to fool anyone who checks into thinking she is still in her cabin. The deception is not discovered until the following morning, by which time Lucy has gained a head start of two nights and a day. She almost certainly chooses her day of departure for the advantage afforded by the absence of the estate's other inhabitants, but the timing of her escape is highly symbolic. For most of Lee County, the July Fourth observance is an affirmation of slavery that belies the essence of the holiday, but Lucy's act of self-liberation makes it truly her Independence Day. Her fate is never revealed, but when Grimes and his posse fail to recapture her, the overseer concludes that Lucy has fled north, with Canada as her likely destination.

For all of the Duttons' paternalist rhetoric about their relationship to their slaves, the discussion following Lucy's disappearance lays bare the economic principles of slave ownership. Denying the slaves' humanity, Dutton declares, "They are our personal property, bought with our own money, a

pretty penny.” As if to emphasize his right of possession, Dutton includes in the runaway ad a \$500 reward for Lucy’s return and the description, “She has the letter ‘R’ branded on her face” (*Jubilee*, 128).

Secretly, Vyry rejoices in Lucy’s escape and nurtures her own hope of freedom. Before meeting Randall Ware, freedom seems to Vyry only a vague, abstract notion, “some dream of an answer to prayer that God would suddenly appear and send a deliverer like Moses” (*Jubilee*, 94). Vyry, Walker writes, had never truly considered doing anything but “accepting her lot as a slave, obeying her master and mistress and working hard” (*Jubilee*, 94). Ware’s proposal of marriage and freedom suddenly makes the prospect seem attainable. Ware and freedom consume her waking thoughts, but at night, Vyry “dream[s] confused dreams” that suggest unconscious doubt and foreshadow her experience of the next seven years. In her fitful sleep, Vyry “[struggles] to be free while something [struggles] against her to keep her in chains” (*Jubilee*, 95). Once she sees a door that someone tells her is Freedom. Randall Ware holds a golden key and promises to open the door, but before he can fulfill his promise, his face changes to those of people Vyry does not recognize. When she wakes in tears, Vyry recalls that “the door was still locked, even in her dreams” and that Ware had “backed away from her, tantalizing her with that key.” Though she “begged and begged him” he refused to give her the golden key and “backed away until he disappeared” (*Jubilee*, 95). At other times, Vyry suffers nightmares, from which she wakes “screaming” and “crying” for the mother figures who have died or been sold away (*Jubilee*, 129). When Vyry no longer insists that Randall Ware secure her freedom as a condition of their relationship, Ware’s affections supply a comfort that is revealing of slavery’s psychological toll. Ware’s presence staves off Vyry’s nightmares. Though it goes unspoken between them, their reciprocal love assuages Vyry’s memory of beatings, brandings, hangings and shootings—all the “sorrow and horror” she has witnessed of slavery (*Jubilee*, 130).

That comfort is short lived as her pregnancy causes Vyry to feel a new sense of urgency about



obtaining freedom for herself and her child. Ware's assurances that he would buy her "at the first opportunity" no longer provide solace (*Jubilee*, 142). In a last desperate bid to gain her freedom, Vyry asks John Dutton for permission to marry Ware. She approaches Dutton over the Christmas holidays, when she expects to find him at his most generous. In the first of two important conversations Vyry has with her master-father about her freedom, Dutton is willing to consent to the marriage when he assumes the man Vyry wants to marry is a fellow slave, but news that Vyry's intended is a free man shocks Dutton into momentary speechlessness. His face turns pallid "as if he had surely seen a ghost," and when he finally collects himself to speak, he "[spits] out the words with such fury," Vyry recoils "as if he had hit her." "Why don't you ask me for your freedom and be done with it?" Dutton demands (*Jubilee*, 144). Though slave marriages were not recognized as legal unions, according to Walker, Georgia law provided that mulatto slaves could legally marry free blacks. To allow such a marriage, according to Dutton, would be tantamount to an act of manumission, which is really what Vyry is asking.

Angered by her boldness, John Dutton answers Vyry not as a father to a daughter but as a master to his slave. "I own you, and I own your unborn child," he tells her (*Jubilee*, 144). Dutton's reaction to Lucy's disappearance demonstrates that Dutton regards his slaves not as children but as property. His reply to Vyry is even more revealing. When his paternity is not the fictive kinship slaveholders imagine between themselves and their bondspeople but a true biological relation, Dutton continues to assert ownership over the woman he never acknowledges as his daughter. While Walker exposes the myth that figured slaves as masters' extended family, she also demonstrates how slavery reduced the master's true children to chattel.

After Dutton dismisses her request, a tearful Vyry addresses him by their formal property relation and asks "Master, does you think it's a sin for me to want to be free?" (*Jubilee*, 145). Reverting to the paternalism he has already undermined, Dutton asks who, in his absence, would feed,

clothe, and shelter Vyry. He enumerates the legal obstacles to manumitting her and tries to placate her with the promise to set her free when he dies. Vyry leaves the meeting with “her hope...shriveled and dead within her.” For Vyry, the “beautiful dream of freedom again [seems] forever lost” (*Jubilee*, 146).

Walker concludes the chapter with a musical contrast between the Christmas carol Vyry hears being sung outside in the quarters and the lyrics she has stuck in her head about a master’s promise of manumission deferred. The daughter of a music teacher, Walker makes music an important element of the novel. From the repetition of “Flee as a Bird to Your Mountain” to the song lyrics that serve as the epigraph to each chapter, music bears an important relation to freedom and its denial. As a child, Vyry loves to hear Aunt Sally sing but finds the lyrics of many of the songs perplexing. Eventually, she learns that Sally only sings certain songs when she is “deeply troubled” and that the doleful tones of the music, suggestive of Sally’s mood, express the “anger and resentment that she could voice in no other way” (*Jubilee*, 74).

With the last apparent avenue of freedom closed to her, Vyry enters a period of hopelessness. She goes through the daily motions of living, but “with no will and no dreams” (*Jubilee*, 149). She feels her life “taking on a pattern of doom” (*Jubilee*, 149). Vyry’s first baby is a boy. Her second child dies before it is born, but for this baby Vyry does not grieve. She simply thinks, “That was one who would never be a slave” (*Jubilee*, 151). Numb to all emotion, Vyry considers her life devoid of joy, hope, or expectation. When Vyry hears the Duttons vilify abolitionists—people of whom she has also heard Aunt Sally speak—she asks Randall Ware about them. Vyry hears enough of his explanation to discern their opposition to slavery and loses interest. She thinks, “Why work myself up all over again about freedom? Freedom is a secret word I dare not say” (*Jubilee*, 152).

Walker closes her antebellum section with two more failed attempts to secure Vyry’s freedom. A slave auction presents the long awaited opportunity for Ware to buy Vyry, but the plan goes awry. Vyry has Brother Ezekiel write a note to inform Ware of the auction. The illiterate messenger who

carries the missive is stopped by patrollers and mistakenly shows them the note instead of the traveling pass Ezekiel has also written for him. Ware sends an agent to buy Vyry at the auction, but with the Duttons alerted to the plan, the bidding goes on just long enough to discover the identity of Ware's agent and is stopped before the sale can be completed.

After the auction fails, Ware devises a plan for Vyry to run away with him. His strategy is to reach Maryland and from there, have Vyry smuggled to Canada, but he insists that she must leave their children—the eldest, James, and the baby girl, Minna. When the time comes, Vyry cannot bring herself to leave them. At the last minute, Vyry defies Ware's instructions and takes the children with her. "I couldn't leave my children," Vyry reflects, "I just couldn't. I knows if I leave my baby she will die" (*Jubilee*, 169). Carrying the children slows Vyry's travel, and before they reach the rendezvous point, patrollers overtake the group by following their trail of footprints. They are returned to the Dutton plantation, where Vyry is sentenced to seventy-five lashes. Walker describes in vivid detail how Vyry's hands and feet are bound, how she is tied to the whipping post, the sound of the whip cutting air and flesh, the stars and colors Vyry sees with the first blow, and the burning of the whip she feels against her bare back until she loses consciousness. At nightfall, the house slaves carry her to her cabin and clean the lacerations, which eventually begin healing into scars. In her delirium, Vyry does not recognize her own children.

## **A War to Set Slaves Free**

Section two opens with a summary of political disputes over states' rights, anti-slavery, and the election of Abraham Lincoln. Returning from the Montgomery convention that adopts a Confederate Constitution and elects Jefferson Davis president, Dutton's carriage overturns and kills his coachman. Dutton survives the accident with a broken leg but lingers ill for two months. The leg does not heal and

turns gangrenous, but Dutton refuses to have it amputated. His death from the diseased limb symbolizes the fate of the nation. The decay of tissue and spread of infection, like the earlier “plague,” suggest the role of slavery in the impending national crisis. Dutton receives the initial injury just after attending the formation of Confederate States of America. His sickness; the failure of medicine, opiates, and liquor to relieve the pain; and Dutton’s refusal to cut off the necrotic leg occur in the months between secession and the first shots of the Civil War, which are first reported at Dutton’s interment. At the conclusion of the graveside service, neighbors deliver news of Ft. Sumter and the call for Confederate enlistments.

The disease metaphor Walker invokes in Dutton’s death also appears in her journal as a commentary on racism and white Southerners’ defense of segregation. In August 1961, after a summer of Freedom Rides to integrate the interstate bus system, Walker predicted that such activism would bring about the end of legal segregation but that the racist attitudes would persist. “Of course, the white South is ignorant of the terrible traumatic injury it is rendering in its white youth,” wrote Walker. “For a hundred years the South has been feeding its young a deadly poison of hatred in the form of race prejudice.” She continued,

What is so horrible is that the gangrene in the South has spread all over the country. Prejudice exists in subtle devious forms all over this country, in housing, in employment, in professional opportunities and what is even worse is the poison in the mind—the false notion of innate, inherent superiority on the basis of color or race is the worst and most stupid illness of all. It makes the United States a morally sick country afflicted with an illness so deadly and so dangerous its mortality rate is higher than its survival [rate] and small percentage of cured and regenerated minds.<sup>31</sup>

Sometime after she made the initial entry, Walker penciled in the margins of her journal, “Bigots are sick people who do not recognize their sickness.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Walker, Journal 61, p. 124-125, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,3652>, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,3651>.

<sup>32</sup> Walker, Journal 61, p. 126, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,3654>.

The week of funerary rituals that precedes Dutton's burial includes a white soloist's performance of the hymn that embodies Vyry's freedom aspirations. As with the Fourth of July hanging, the singing of "Flee as a Bird to Your Mountain" as a tribute to the dead slave master connotes the blighted hope of the freedom that is once again denied Vyry. When Vyry asks to marry Randall Ware, Dutton tells her she will be free when he dies. Whether Dutton lies about the provisions of his will or whether his white heirs ignore his behest, the promise of manumission goes unfulfilled. Whatever the case, Dutton invokes the promise to torment Vyry on his deathbed. On the afternoon of the day he dies, Dutton recognizes Vyry and assures her that he has not forgotten his pledge from years earlier, but in one last exertion of mastery, he taunts her with the freedom he continues to withhold. He tells her, "you ain't free till I die, and I ain't dead yet!" (*Jubilee*, 192). Even then, freedom does not come to Vyry. The ironic playing of "Flee as a Bird" at his funeral might well be read as Dutton's final affront to the daughter he never acknowledges.

With Vyry feeling once again the impossibility of freedom, a note from Randall Ware temporarily raises her hopes, until she learns what he has written: "There's going to be a war to set the black slaves free. When the war is over I will come and get you. Wait for me" (*Jubilee*, 198). To Vyry, the idea of a war for emancipation amounts to "crazy talk." Believing herself no closer to attaining her freedom, Vyry cries "bitter, angry tears of disappointment" (*Jubilee*, 198). Despite Vyry's skepticism, the first prophetic line of Ware's note succinctly encapsulates Walker's rendering of the war. The year before *Jubilee* appeared in print, the country concluded its four-year celebration of the Civil War centennial. The observance coincided with Walker's time as a Ph.D. candidate and with her completion of the *Jubilee* manuscript. Walker's entire novel, but specifically the second section, can be read as a rebuttal to the official Civil War commemoration, which stressed national unity but was at times a segregated affair that excluded or minimized the emancipationist memory of the war. The Civil War, Margaret Walker contends, was "a war to set the black slaves free" (*Jubilee*, 198).

To be sure, John and Salina Dutton engage in ideological discussions about slavery's role in the war. The Duttons' fantasies about their relationships with their bondspeople articulate a familiar defense of slavery, which authors like Margaret Mitchell and MacKinlay Kantor adopt as their own. Walker represents bondspeople's thoughts and aspirations as something separate and contradictory to the master's interests. In doing so, she refutes the Duttons' erroneous ideas about master-slave relations and about slavery in general. Walker also effects a more blatant admission about the nature of the war when Salina Dutton aligns herself politically with Alexander Stephens and his observation—as Salina paraphrases it—that the Confederacy is “founded upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man; subordination to the superior race is his natural and moral condition.” Salina reads a newspaper account of Stephens's remarks and finds his unabashed racism “inspiring” (*Jubilee*, 187). As an ardent supporter of the Confederacy, Salina lays bare the essence of the political question, “Haven't you heard President Davis say time and again that the whole thing is a question of superior white people and inferior black people?” (*Jubilee*, 231). As Salina Dutton aligns herself ideologically with the racial caste system espoused by leaders of the Confederacy, Walker again suggests slavery and the Confederate cause as a strain of what she describes in her private journals as a “poison” and a “sickness.”

An anomalous feature of Margaret Walker's novel is that its main character drops out of the narrative for roughly half of the second section. As the narrative shifts away from Vry, *Jubilee*, the novel of slavery, becomes a novel of the Civil War. When news of the war arrives during John Dutton's funeral, Johnny decides immediately that he will fight for the Confederacy. The unit he joins requires each of its members to be self-equipped with accoutrements that make it “automatically an outfit for the aristocratic class” (*Jubilee*, 201). He selects his battle mount from the prized thoroughbreds of the Dutton stable. Uniforms, one for battle and one for dress, are tailored at home. A family heirloom satisfies the regimental requirement for sabers. To tend to his personal needs, Johnny

also takes the slave Jim as his body servant. The junior John Dutton is, like his mother, ardent in his devotion to the Confederate cause and just as oblivious to the irony of Jim's labor supporting a war to preserve slavery.

While Johnny waits at Salina's house for the departure of his cavalry regiment, mother and son are "appalled" to receive Lillian's letter reporting her husband's opposition to the war and his intention not to volunteer. Kevin MacDougall, Lillian explains, thinks secession "an ugly word." He has studied war and condemns it all but considers fratricidal civil war the worst. He resolves to wait for conscription before he leaves his wife and children to risk death for a cause he does not support. Whether he is truly a product of the 1860s or the 1960s, Kevin's opposition resonates with the draft protests that coincided with the escalation of the U.S. war in Vietnam, just as Walker was finishing her novel. Kevin's passivism most certainly conflicts with the secessionist passions of his in-laws, who mistake his conscientious objection for cowardice. Johnny curses him. Salina declares that she will not suffer such a disgrace upon her family and insists that Kevin "will go and go of his own free will" (*Jubilee*, 203). He agrees only "reluctantly," but Salina does persuade Kevin not to wait for conscription. When Kevin refuses the offer of a horse and joins the infantry instead of the cavalry Johnny is "disgusted" (*Jubilee*, 204). "That's the worst outfit you can join," he says. "Don't you know that the infantry is the least protected unit in the army?"

Kevin regards Johnny as a "swashbuckling professional soldier" and suspects his brother-in-law of joining the army to chase "glory," and "excitement" (*Jubilee*, 204). Kevin tells him, "You talk like war is a great adventure and we are sallying forth like great white knights in armor to rescue damsels in distress and slay the wicked dragon who is terrifying the people. I think you are going to find that it's a life and death matter and a lot of people are going to be killed without reason. Almost anybody who goes into battle is sure to be killed" (*Jubilee*, 204). Johnny misinterprets Kevin's concern as fear. "I don't think war is a party or some kind of picnic, but it is a game, and you learn to play the game

according to the rules. Your first rule is to learn to protect yourself while you advance the Cause of your side and at the same time kill the enemy” (*Jubilee*, 204). As Walker follows her soldiers to war, her descriptions of battle ultimately demonstrate the collision of these two contradictory philosophies.

At twenty-two, Johnny Dutton “[finds] the whole meaning of his life” in the war (*Jubilee*, 216). He stays calm in the chaos of battle and distinguishes himself both as an expert marksman and as an implacable killer of his enemies. As the model soldier defending the cause of Confederate independence, the young colonel of privileged birth epitomizes every battle romance ever written about the glory of the Confederacy. After surviving Antietam and multiple raiding parties, “without so much as a scratch,” Johnny Dutton has “led such a charmed battle life that he [feels] himself almost invulnerable,” but his wounding at Chickamauga shatters Johnny’s illusions of invincibility (*Jubilee*, 216). At the very moment the sounds of drums and bugles strengthen his certainty that “victory must reward such a righteous Cause,” Johnny feels his horse Beauty shudder beneath him, then a searing pain. He waits for his fellow soldiers to rush past, then dismounts to see that the horse has a broken leg and must be shot right away “to get him out of his misery” (*Jubilee*, 218). With implied regret that he apparently has not experienced with the killing of enemy soldiers, Johnny places his pistol to the horse’s head, closes his eyes, and squeezes the trigger. His eyes stinging “with tears he dare not shed for his dead horse,” the injured colonel feels “disappointment” that the battle has left him behind and revulsion at the sight of dead men sitting upright staring back at him. Conscious now of his own mortality, “For the first time in his life,” Walker writes, “Johnny Dutton felt fear for his fate” (*Jubilee*, 218). After spending the night propped against Beauty’s corpse and dreaming nightmares in which he calls out to his dead horse, he awakens in a makeshift hospital, where he hears “the groans and the labored breathing of the dying” (*Jubilee*, 218). After a long wait to be examined, Johnny learns he has a bullet in his lung that the doctor cannot extract. The wound will heal externally, the doctor says, but depending on whether the bullet made a hole in Johnny’s lung and whether that hole keeps bleeding,



young Colonel Dutton might be fine, or he might die of the injury.

Six weeks after the battle, with Johnny lying in the bed of a wagon driven by Jim, the pair embark on a journey back to the Dutton plantation. The cool November air and constant jostling of the wagon do not help Johnny's condition, but Jim manages to deliver him to the Dutton house, which affords more comforts than the road or hospital. Among these are the attentions of a local belle who, upon hearing of Johnny's return, discovers her previously undeclared affections for the one marriageable bachelor in town. Afterward, Salina blames the devastating battle news from Chattanooga for her son's fatal turn. News of the first day's battle reaches the Duttons, and Johnny coughs "great gulps of blood" all night. At the burial of her favorite child, Salina says she feels as if "something has got my heart in an iron grip and is squeezing the very breath out of me" (*Jubilee*, 240). Johnny, however, is not the Duttons' last casualty of war. If Johnny's death undermines his view of battle as a "game," then Kevin's fate affirms the professor's cautions about the grim nature of war.

Two weeks before the end of his service, Kevin writes a letter to his wife telling her that he is counting the days until his return and he does not intend to reenlist. His further service would be of no use because, he confesses, "my heart is not in this war" (*Jubilee*, 248). Thirteen days after writing the letter, Kevin's infantry unit fights an unplanned battle that he experiences as if "watching things from a distance, objectively, as though he had no place here, and had no part in what was happening." Ideologically, that has been his position on the war all along. His detachment is interrupted when he encounters a black Union soldier, who surprises Kevin by the "look of hatred" on his face (*Jubilee*, 249). The soldier points his bayonet at Kevin, who in turn raises his own weapon. The mutual and virtually simultaneous wounds inflicted by the two men bring to fruition the vision of war Kevin espoused two years earlier. He considers the war to have very little to do with him but cannot resist his family's pressure to enlist. He betrays his pacifist beliefs and serves his two-year term only to be wounded one day shy of freedom in a battle that was never supposed to be fought. Kevin's fate

transforms Johnny's "righteous" cause into the senseless death that Kevin himself predicts.

Expected home at the end of his enlistment, Kevin arrives on the appointed day but with an abdominal wound that leaves "the pall of death hanging over the house." Kevin suffers "agonizing pain" so severe that he "literally pray[s] to die." Finally, his heart fails under the strain (*Jubilee*, 252). After Kevin's death—the last of three ultimately fatal homecomings in as many years—Lillian languishes in her grief. She takes little notice of her children but visits Kevin's grave daily. Salina sews a Confederate flag to display over her front door to show her guests "the patriotism of her stricken rebel home" (*Jubilee*, 252).

For all of her efforts to strip war and the Confederate cause of the glamour Johnny Dutton ascribes to it, Walker also does not deviate from Randall Ware's assertion that "there's going to be a war to set the black slave's free." Jim arrives at this assessment of the war, Walker implies, through his proximity to Union troops at the front when he accompanies Johnny Dutton. Unbeknownst to his young master, Jim slips back and forth between Union and Confederate lines and offers to work for the federal troops. He is advised to wait until he can gain knowledge of Confederate troop movements that might be useful to the Federals. When Johnny is shot through the lung and relies on Jim to deliver him home, the mission poses a personal dilemma for the bondsman. Accompanying the Confederate colonel for two years, Jim learns what is at stake in the war for himself and his fellow slaves. He realizes that "his own chances for freedom [lie] with the Union Army" (*Jubilee*, 220). Jim knows of Lincoln's proclamation of freedom for all slaves in states in rebellion. Though no slaveholders have yet abided by this law, Jim knows that slaves are fleeing their masters en masse, trekking the roads and swamps and mountains to reach the safety and freedom of Union lines. To return Johnny Dutton to his family means putting that much distance between himself and the freedom he desires, as well as the larger "struggle for black freedom" he wants to support. With Jim's deliberations, Walker recasts the familiar figure of the loyal slave who in plantation fiction is characterized by servile devotion to the master's family. In

*Gone With the Wind*, this stereotype is represented by Pork, Mammy, Dilcey, Sam, and Mose, the Wilkes slave who returns to Twelve Oaks after Ashley is taken prisoner. But Margaret Walker's Jim is keenly informed of the political situation and knows where his interests lie. His decision to help Johnny go home is not motivated by servility but is a matter of personal compassion that casts Jim as the moral superior of his enslavers. He considers Johnny's eminent death and the fact that the young man cannot make it home by himself. Guided by his own personal code of "honor, duty, and noblesse oblige," Jim resolves, "I'll carry him home to his Maw where he can die in peace, but I sho ain't staying there" (*Jubilee*, 220). Carry him home Jim does, and he prays the whole way that Johnny does not die before they reach their destination, lest Jim be accused of his murder. Before following through on his resolution to leave, Jim talks with Vry and tells her he knows Johnny is going to die and doesn't want to be around to see it. He says he has heard reports that Johnny was "mighty brave on the battlefield" and knows that Salina is proud of her son. "But I seen what they was fighting for," he tells Vry, "and I knows he fought against me and you and all us colored peoples." Jim says he never liked Johnny and knows Johnny never liked him. But, Jim confesses, he feels sorry for Johnny now, not because he is dying but because he is young and has not really lived and has wasted what time he had fighting "a war for the wrong things" (*Jubilee*, 238). Jim's adherence to his moral code and his ability to show compassion to the enslaver who fought against him is consistent with Vry's espousal of Christian forgiveness at the end of the novel.

True to his resolve, Jim makes his way back to the Union army, where he meets Randall Ware and Brother Ezekiel. Here, Walker explains Ware's sudden departure from Dawson. As a blacksmith, Ware had prospered "in a place where no black man really had any form of security" (*Jubilee*, 229). When his guardian Randall Wheelwright died, Ware's status as a free man became even more precarious. Without the protection of a white guardian, Ware had no way to redress infringements of his rights. At any time, the freedom into which he was born could be revoked, however unlawfully, and

he would have no recourse. While paying a visit to Vyry, a bullet grazed his arm and convinced him that it was time to get out of the state. He abandoned his business and property and made his way north. Though he was free, he traveled by way of the Underground Railroad, as if he were a fugitive slave (Jubilee, 229). The racism he encounters in northern states offers little improvement over the slave South. Though his movements are less restricted, he is unable to earn wages commensurate with his skill. When he goes to work as a blacksmith for the Union army, Ware is pleased to be “striking a powerful blow for the freedom of the blacks” (*Jubilee*, 225).

The only black soldier who appears in *Jubilee* is the one who engages Kevin in combat in affirmation of Walker’s anti-war message. More often, African Americans’ contribution to the Civil War and the cause freedom are figured in terms of noncombat roles. In addition to Ware’s blacksmith services, Jim works as a barber and Ezekiel operates as a Union spy. As the minister of the Rising Glory Church, Ezekiel inspired his congregation with the promise of a Moses who would one day lead them out of bondage. As he lies in an army hospital dying from an unspecified illness, Ezekiel prophetically proclaims, “Mister Lincoln is our Moses and God done told him to make old Pharaoh set my people free” (*Jubilee*, 242). At the same time, Walker portrays the impressment of slaves by the Confederacy. Overseer Grimes delivers several work gangs to the munitions factory in Georgia, where they either suffer injury, take the opportunity to escape, or are shot in the attempt. (*Jubilee*, 209-212).

To the last, Salina Dutton clings to her conviction that the South will prevail. Just when Confederate victory seems increasingly unlikely, she invests five thousand dollars in Confederate bonds, plus an unspecified amount in stocks and cotton. Her refusal to entertain the possibility of defeat leaves the Duttons virtually broke. Determined to make her land productive, Salina drags her family and house slaves on a three-and-a-half-day journey to Andersonville and back. Her idea is to re-enslave black Union soldiers who are being held at the military prison. Though Salina procures no laborers, the trip conjures MacKinlay Kantor’s novel and allows Vyry to witness that “dismal rank pigsty” where

“Yankees were dying by the thousands every day and rotting where they died” (*Jubilee*, 264). From Salina’s inquiries, readers learn the reason the prison contains no black prisoners. The policy on black soldiers is “put them to work, send them back to their masters, or in the case of injury and battle wounds, shoot them” (*Jubilee*, 264). By having Vyry witness the deplorable conditions of the prison, Walker positions her novel against Kantor’s *Andersonville*, which endorses Ira Claffey’s paternalism and suggests the moment of freedom as traumatic for the formerly enslaved.

After their return from Andersonville, when the sound of Union guns and the stress of imminent Confederate loss causes Salina to have a stroke, Vyry once again resumes her position as the novel’s central character. Fearing the approach of Sherman’s army, Lillian, Vyry, Caline, and May Liza work to conceal the family’s valuables. The women fill a huge chest with silver and gold dinnerware and jewelry and hide it in the hollowed-out trunk of an oak tree. Money in the form of Confederate specie, they bury, notably, in the cemetery. A small “hoard of gold pieces” they hide under the floorboards between the house and kitchen (*Jubilee*, 273-274). Their efforts prove unnecessary as the Union army takes a route far beyond the Dutton property, but because Sherman’s men render the telegraph system unusable, most of rural Georgia is cut off from news of the war (*Jubilee*, 274). As Lillian becomes increasingly detached, Vyry takes charge of the household and sets about plowing and planting until her example prompts the others to help her sow a vegetable crop (*Jubilee*, 270). Not until federal troops arrive in the third week of May 1865 do the women learn of the end of the war.

Vyry is cooking in the kitchen when the children announce the soldier’s arrival. “Hurrah, hurrah, we bring the jubilee/ Hurrah, hurrah, the flag to make you free...As we go marching through Georgia,” sing the soldiers, who are followed by a procession of freedpeople (*Jubilee*, 277). The commanding officer has the former slaves assemble on the front porch to hear the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. On the morning the soldiers bring news of the freedom for which she has so long yearned, Vyry is distracted by her attempts to stifle Jim’s impulse to “dance a jig” before the

reading concludes (*Jubilee*, 279). The words “forever free” envelope Vyry in “reverie” even as she still seems to question the reality: “Could it be possible that the golden door of freedom had at last swung open?” (*Jubilee*, 279). The officer finishes reading and begins to fold his paper before Vyry is aware of the tears streaming down her face (*Jubilee*, 279).

Vyry’s first act as a free woman is to return to the kitchen and resume the cooking that was interrupted by the soldiers’ arrival. The task of celebrating belongs to the children. At ten years old, Jim is the same age Vyry was when she wished herself a bird so she could fly away from her master’s plantation. Vyry’s eldest child is by far the most jubilant at the news of emancipation. He lifts his little sister into his arms as he sings and dances in celebration, “Minna you is free!..Jubilee, you is free!” (*Jubilee*, 280). Minna, though somewhat perplexed and probably too young at age six to fully comprehend the morning’s events, joins her brother in celebration. Laughing and clapping, she recites the word as a question, “Free? Free? Free?” (*Jubilee*, 280).

Vyry returns to the kitchen to find it “overrun” with hungry soldiers, who have already eaten all the biscuits, ham, and coffee she prepared for breakfast. She spends her first day of freedom frying chickens for the soldiers as fast as they can slaughter and clean the birds. She ends her day of jubilee much as she did Lillian’s wedding day—exhausted. Meanwhile, the so-called liberators vandalize the Dutton house. They destroy the planter’s finery and help themselves to anything that resembles food or its makings, from newborn livestock to the last drop of liquor. Appropriating the bounty the Duttons acquired through slave labor, they raid the smoke and spring houses. They torch the gin house and all the cotton it contains. In their apparent determination to destroy everything of monetary value, the soldiers pour molasses all through the big house. The day’s work represents the liberating army as horde of robbers and miscreants, hardly better than the slave owners who amassed the looted stores. The vandals’ decision to strew molasses “up and down the stairs and through the parlors making trickling streams all over Big Missy’s fine scarlet carpets” is particularly poignant, considering the

product's significance in the history of U.S. and Caribbean slavery (*Jubilee*, 281).<sup>33</sup> The process of refining pulped sugar cane, a task usually performed by slaves, produced both molasses and crystallized sugar.<sup>34</sup> In what he terms an "essentialization of sweetener," Andrew Warnes explains how the "whiteness and expense of refined sugar" were presumed to be evidence of its "innate superiority," while the "darkness and cheapness of molasses" signaled its "intrinsic inferiority."<sup>35</sup> Warnes argues that the "hierarchy of color" suggested by the relative market value of sugar and molasses "also clearly mirrored a hierarchy of race." Though slave labor produced both sugar and molasses, only the syrup, considered cheap and inferior, was regularly included in the food allotments for bondspeople.<sup>36</sup> As molasses represents both slave labor and political iniquity, its use in defiling the Duttons' property is tantamount to the slave economy turning back on itself.

The soldiers are followed by a procession of freedpeople that stretches back more than a mile. Among them, an elderly woman drives a cart pulled by goats and filled with "every possible thing she could carry." At the sight of her vehicle, a soldier asks, "Hey, Auntie, where'd you get all this stuff? You look like the children of Israel coming out of Egypt" (*Jubilee*, 282). His fellow soldiers laugh at the jest, but in the years before the war as slaves prayed for a Moses to lead them out of bondage and in the itinerant years as Vyry and her family search for a permanent home, Walker evokes the Biblical Exodus as the literary referent for her story of slavery and freedom. When the goat cart driver claims to have bought her goods, the soldier asks mockingly if she used "worthless Confederate specie," implying that he either disbelieves her claim or can't imagine how she acquired the small fortune she would need to purchase her collection. Refusing to be the object of the soldier's humor, the woman

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<sup>33</sup> Andrew Warnes, *Hunger Overcome?: Food and Resistance in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 99.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 100.

explains that she worked for her master more than fifty years and in return rarely even received enough to eat. She answers the soldier's teasing by asserting that these material possessions are her just compensation for a lifetime of coerced labor. She didn't need money to acquire the goods because she already paid and then some. "I bought it with myself," she tells the soldiers. "I just took what was mine, cause I buyed it with myself" (*Jubilee*, 282).

Also among the freedpeople who arrive with the army is the elder Jim, who brings news of Randall Ware. He tells Vyry that when he last saw Ware, he suffered from a serious fever and Jim doesn't believe Ware could have survived (*Jubilee*, 283). The news is a blow to Vyry at the end of her exhausting first day of freedom, but she refuses to believe he is dead (*Jubilee*, 283). She speculates that Ware is alive but the illness has delayed his return. She continues to wait for his arrival.

Later that night, another freedman who has befriended Vyry's son intervenes when a Union soldier attempts to assault Vyry. Lillian, alone in the big house except for her children, also meets with violence during the night. Vyry finds her half-sister lying unconscious on the floor, her head in a pool of blood. Molasses has been strewn over the walls and carpet and feathers from the split-open mattress have been scattered around the room. Near Lillian lies a gun that has blood on it but has not been fired. The scene suggests Lillian may have tried to stop vandals from destroying the room, but the rip in her garment, which looks as though "someone had tried to tear off her dress," also hints at sexual assault. The doctor who examines her tells Vyry the head wound where Lillian was struck with the gun is likely "her worst problem" (*Jubilee*, 291). As the doctor departs the house, he repeats a phrase John Dutton uttered when he denied Vyry's request for marriage and freedom. Indicating the portraits of his grandparents, Dutton told her, "Every time I look at them I think they are telling me to uphold the honor of this house. I have inherited their responsibility just as my son will inherit the honor of this house when I am dead" (*Jubilee*, 183). In *Slavery and Social Death*, sociologist Orlando Patterson explains a central feature of slavery is that it dishonors the enslaved. Patterson's notion of honor is a



system of behavior and reputation that is directly tied to a person's power and position in society. The dishonor slaves experienced, according to Patterson, stemmed from the "debasement inherent in having no being except as an expression of another's being." At the same time, Patterson argues, "the honor of the master was enhanced by the subjection of his slave."<sup>37</sup> After appraising the condition of the Dutton house and the destruction wrought by Federal soldiers, the doctor of *Jubilee* proclaims, "My God, the honor of this house is dead this morning." His declaration signals the demise of the Dutton planter dynasty but also the ouster of a ruling class that derived its position through the degradation of the enslaved (*Jubilee*, 291).

Lillian is never able to recall the events of the previous night. Following the loss of her brother, husband, and both parents, the attack leaves Lillian in a fragile mental state from which she never recovers. The nature of her disorder is not entirely clear. She lapses in and out of the present and sometimes wanders off. She also claims to hear the sound of band music when no musicians are near. At times, she fails to recognize her own daughter, which distresses little Susan to the point of tears. Lillian's son Bobby refuses Jim's invitations to play and says he must keep watch over his mother (*Jubilee*, 295). Once, believing herself a young bride-to be, Lillian tells the doctor she is waiting for her mother to take her into town to shop for her trousseau (*Jubilee*, 299). At other times, she believes herself to be a little girl. When Vyry finds Lillian by her old slave cabin, Lillian complains that all of her other playmates have left and asks if she and Vyry can play together (*Jubilee*, 307).

In the fall, when it becomes apparent that Lillian, in the doctor's words, is "not always in her right mind," he has the banker Barrow locate Lillian's next of kin, a first cousin of her father named Lucy Porter (*Jubilee*, 300). At Christmas, when Cousin Lucy and her husband finally arrive to take Lillian and the children home with them, Vyry cooks two Christmas dinners. One is served in the

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<sup>37</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 10-11, 78.

dining room for Lillian, her cousins and children, the other is served in the kitchen for Vyry, her children, and Vyry's new husband. After he befriends young Jim and intervenes in Vyry's attack, Innis Brown becomes a fixture on the Dutton plantation. For several months, Vyry resists Brown's proposals as she holds out hope for Randall Ware's return. Finally, Vyry agrees that she will marry Brown at Christmas if she has no word from Ware.

As Lucy packs Lillian's belongings, Vyry shows her where the women buried the money, jewelry, and the chest of valuables. Lucy tells Vyry that they are unable to take all of the goods and that she should pick out something for herself. "I just think it's no more than right for you to have some of this stuff," she tells Vyry, though she probably bases her offer on the care Vyry provides Lillian during her illness and her years of enslaved service to the Duttons. If Lucy means to suggest a right of inheritance for Vyry as John Dutton's child, she does not say so explicitly, and the biological relation between Vyry and her dead master remains unacknowledged.

### **"Freedom is One Hundred Years Overdue": Reconstruction in the Era of Civil Rights**

Where most antebellum slave narratives end with freedom, *Jubilee* explores the continuities between bondspeople's lives in slavery and the post-emancipation lives of freedpeople. While the third section deals with the Browns' attempt to make the most of their freedom—to settle in a home of their own and reap the fruits of their labor—the narrative is also concerned with a repetition of earlier traumas. Walker's account of the terrorist violence during Reconstruction is particularly notable. As her journal writings attest, Walker recognized historical parallels between the 1860s and the 1960s. By logical extension, *Jubilee* is as much a comment on the twentieth century civil rights movement and Walker's hope for the future as it is an account of her great-grandparents' experience. For Vyry, freedom evokes much of her ordeal of slavery, but the novel eventually arrives at a prescription of

faith, love, and forgiveness.

In the early morning hours of June 12, 1963, Medgar Evers, a leader in the civil rights struggle in Mississippi, was fatally shot in his driveway. Earlier in the evening of June 11, President Kennedy made a televised speech in support of civil rights, and Evers worked late into the night at the NAACP field office. When he returned home, he was so exhausted, he forgot the pact he made with his wife that they would exit their vehicles on the passenger's side; the driver's door left them exposed to an overgrown lot where they knew an assassin could hide.<sup>38</sup> Margaret Walker recorded the news of Evers's death in one of 132 volumes of private journals she kept during her lifetime. She described Evers's assassination as "The worst tragedy of the whole movement for equality" and "tragic and overwhelming in its horror."<sup>39</sup> Walker often recorded major events in the civil rights movement, including incidents of retaliatory violence by white supremacists. On September 15, 1963, she was on a train to Chicago when a porter told her a church had been bombed Birmingham. In her journal, Walker jotted down the few facts she knew at the time: The bomb had detonated during Sunday school and four people were dead.<sup>40</sup> At 10:22 that morning, dynamite planted by the Ku Klux Klan exploded under the basement of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church. It was the city's largest African American church and had served as a meeting place for civil rights organizers. The blast killed eleven-year-old Denise McNair, along with Addie Mae Collins, Carol Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, all age fourteen. Twenty-two others were injured in the attack.<sup>41</sup> On June 24, 1964, Walker wrote that three missing

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Myrlie Evers-Williams in Martin Kent and Steve Harris, *Free at Last :Civil Rights Heroes*, Beverly Hills, CA, 2005, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8\\_HBdrJkmDE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_HBdrJkmDE) ; "Myrlie Evers-Williams: Medgar's Assassination," Video Interview with Myrlie-Evers Williams, National Visionary Leadership Project Oral History Archive, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibJFzOBtmag>.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Walker, Journal 68, February-June 1963, p.157, Margaret Walker Personal Papers [AF012] Series II: Journal and Diary Material, Margaret Walker Center, Jackson State University, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13957> .

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Walker, Journal 69, July-November 1963, p.107, Margaret Walker Personal Papers [AF012] Series II: Journal and Diary Material, Margaret Walker Center, Jackson State University, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,11460>

<sup>41</sup> Jon Meacham, "Fifty Years After Bombing, Birmingham is Resurrected," *Time*, September 13, 2013,

civil rights workers in Mississippi were “feared dead by [illegible edit] foul play” after their station wagon was “found burned out on a lonely road.”<sup>42</sup> Six weeks later, the bodies of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were found buried in an earthen dam. They had been murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>43</sup> In that same journal entry, Walker recorded the bombing of three homes in McComb, Mississippi, and complained that Byron De La Beckwith, the man tried for Medgar Evers’s murder, had “gone scott free.”<sup>44</sup>

While all of the incidents affected Walker to the extent that she wrote about them in her journals, the murder of Medgar Evers was more personal. Evers, the Mississippi field secretary for the NAACP, was also Margaret Walker’s neighbor. While watching coverage of the murder on the television show “Eyewitness to History,” Walker saw footage of her thirteen-year-old son<sup>45</sup> standing in front of the Evers house. When she spoke to him by phone, Walker’s son told her, “Mama, the blood is all over the place.”<sup>46</sup> News of Evers’s murder spurred a flurry of writing and self-reflection about what Walker could or should do on behalf of the civil rights movement. In the entry immediately following her record of Evers’s death, Walker noted, “More essays and articles on the Race issue are popping out

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<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2151804,00.html?pcd=pw-edit>; “16th Street Baptist Church Bombing: Forty Years Later, Birmingham Still Struggles with Violent Past,” *NPR.Org*, September 15, 2003, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1431932>.

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Walker, Journal 72, April-September 1964, p. 79, Margaret Walker Personal Papers [AF012] Series II: Journal and Diary Material, Margaret Walker Center, Jackson State University, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,4945>.

<sup>43</sup> Robert D. McFadden, “First Murder Charge in ‘64 Civil Rights Killings of 3,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/07/national/07mississippi.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Walker, Journal 72, April-September 1964, p. 79, Margaret Walker Personal Papers [AF012] Series II: Journal and Diary Material, Margaret Walker Center, Jackson State University, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,4945>; In 1964, two all-white, all-male juries failed to reach a verdict in the case. Thirty years later in 1994, Beckwith was tried a third time and found guilty of Evers’s murder.

<sup>45</sup> At the time of Evers’s death, Walker’s youngest son Sigismund was approximately six weeks away from his fourteenth birthday; see Margaret Walker, Journal 35 page 11 and Journal 68 page 161, Margaret Walker Personal Papers [AF012] Series II: Journal and Diary Material, Margaret Walker Center, Jackson State University, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,8637>; <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13961>.

<sup>46</sup> Walker, Journal 68, p. 161 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13961>.

of my mind and on paper.” That was followed by a report that she had “written an article that is both a tribute to Medgar Evers and an exposé of the whole Mississippi story,” but Walker decided that the piece might provoke reprisals against her family and could not be published. “I seem to be too vulnerable, too fearful, and too cowardly,” she lamented.<sup>47</sup> Walker often felt torn between her desire to help advance the cause of civil rights, her writing, and her family responsibilities. While she chastised herself for inaction on the civil rights front, she acknowledged, “I cannot salve my conscience nor continue my career as a creative writer if I stay there [Mississippi] but if I leave without real security I jeopardize the welfare of my family.”<sup>48</sup> At the end of July she was again taking stock. “Am I doing something for the cause of freedom? Going to jail, demonstrating, boycotting, sitting in, campaigning and lobbying or what am I doing?” she asked herself.<sup>49</sup> In April 1964, Walker was still feeling conflicted. As she prepared to send a letter urging Hubert Humphrey to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, she wrote, “I don’t want to go to jail! I don’t have that kind of courage.” But she also declared, “My own writing is not enough. Action speaks louder than words.”<sup>50</sup>

In the years before she completed *Jubilee*, Walker often contemplated the legacy of the Civil War and its relation to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. For one seminar paper, she explored “The Moral Conflict of the Civil War as Reflected in Melville’s *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War*.” Walker argued that “neither North nor South was willing to take moral responsibility for the war nor its aftermath—consequently the Civil War was an unfinished revolution with its moral conflict unresolved to this day.”<sup>51</sup> As the nine-year anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* approached, Walker

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<sup>47</sup> Walker, Journal 68, p.160 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13960>.

<sup>48</sup> Walker, Journal 68 p.161 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13961>.

<sup>49</sup> Walker, Journal 69,p.33 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,11418>.

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Walker, Journal 71, February-April 1964, p.119 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,4839>.

<sup>51</sup> Walker, Journal 68, p.136-7, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13966>, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13988>.

observed that the South remained in a state of upheaval and predicted “more trouble ahead unless some consideration is given the hopes and aspirations of the Negro People for freedom.” “Votes, housing, education, recreation, economic and political opportunities are what the Negro people are demanding,” wrote Walker, who went on to explain how she understood the civil rights movement in relation to the Civil War. “White Americans,” she insisted, “must face the truth that the Negro Revolution is a definite movement for complete Freedom, to end Segregation and guarantee the rights of first class citizenship which the Civil War and Reconstruction failed to do because of the Reaction and Return to White Home Rule.” Margaret Walker declared, “Freedom is one hundred years overdue. Lincoln promised Freedom in 1863—This is 1963 and we still have not won it.”<sup>52</sup> Yet she remained optimistic that the next hundred years would mark substantial, positive change. After Medgar Evers’s murder, Walker again related the previous decade’s violence, beginning with the murder of Emmett Till, to the failures of the Civil War. “A hundred years ago there was fighting in Mississippi over Vicksburg and control of the “[Mississippi] river” she observed. “Now there is fighting again in Mississippi over the same issues of a hundred years ago. Negroes have been waiting—disfranchised and dispossessed for a hundred years—a long century. Nobody feels like waiting any longer.”<sup>53</sup> In April 1964, as Walker anticipated the tenth anniversary of the *Brown* ruling, real progress seemed imminent. She predicted that “it will not take ten more years for the Negro Revolution to effect some far-reaching changes.” The agents of that change were a generation of young people who were “not willing to wait a hundred years for freedom.” According to Walker, African Americans born in the 1930s and 1940s did not fear jail or death and would not be daunted in their pursuit of freedom. “The Revolution begun by the Civil War a hundred years ago,” wrote Walker, “was stopped by violent reaction, by the Ku Klux Klan and other

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<sup>52</sup> Walker, Journal 68, p. 128 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13935>.

<sup>53</sup> Walker, Journal 68, p.160 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13960>.

vigilante groups but this one is not going to be stopped.”<sup>54</sup> In this national climate, Walker drafted the third and final section of the manuscript that would become *Jubilee*.

When the Ware-Brown family sets out to establish a new life in freedom, music again assumes an important role. Vyry and the children are thrilled to discover Innis’s vocal ability, and the four of them share in a joyous family sing along. What had once been the only outlet for Vyry’s sorrow becomes a celebration freedom’s possibility. The family first stakes a claim to land in a pine forest on the border of Georgia and Alabama. After their first prosperous year of farming, a flood washes away the next year’s crops, and Minna and Jim fall ill with a near-fatal fever that Vyry diagnoses as malaria.

As Innis searches for a place to relocate, he hears reports of poor whites’ opposition to blacks owning and cultivating their own farms. Though he initially rejects sharecropping as being too similar to slavery, Innis inadvertently enters into agreement to farm on shares. When the Ware-Brown family arrives to take possession of a house and farm they suppose to be homesteaded property, they find the house still occupied. After providing two meals to the obviously hungry family, Vyry learns that their predecessors have farmed that rocky land for three years without harvesting a crop. Vyry and Innis learn the true ownership of the property only after the departure of the poor white family, when the landlord shows up looking for the previous tenants who, he claims, still owe him money. Given the choice of staying and farming the land on shares or vacating the property within twenty-four hours, Innis and Vyry agree to a one-year contract. Unable to sign his name, Innis, as instructed, makes his mark on the document.

The couple’s illiteracy figures prominently in their exploitation by the landlord, who fails to disclose important terms of the contract, alters the conditions at will, and fabricates charges to cheat the family out of their returns on a year’s hard work. First, Pippins charges them for one hundred fifty

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<sup>54</sup> Walker, Journal 71, p. 102-103 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy.4820>, <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy.4821>.

pounds of feed they never bought; he claims his storekeeper has Innis's mark on a receipt and challenges him to dispute the word of the clerk. Though Pippins initially tells the Browns they can live in the house for free, he later claims the family owes him at least \$125 for rent, plus other made-up charges for supplies they never bought. When Pippins reasserts the claim that he has the purchases recorded, Innis reminds the landlord that he cannot read or write. Pippins replies, "That's your hard luck...Ignorance of the law is no excuse" (*Jubilee*, 359). Because Pippins's share of the crop is contingent on the total selling price, he informs the Browns that their portion of the foodstuffs, which they planned to store for their own use, must also be sold. When Innis pays the landlord all of the money he earns from the sale, a total of \$350, Pippins declares that the tenants owe at least \$150 more. In a gesture of false magnanimity, Pippins offers to carry the debt over onto next year's crop. To appease the landlord, Innis re-signs for the following year, but Vyry predicts that if they stay, Pippins will bury them deeper in debt until they cannot afford to feed themselves. She convinces her husband they should depart in all haste, though they have no specific destination in mind.

When their wagon breaks down near Troy, Alabama, the Browns find employment with a businessman and his wife; Innis works in Jacobson's sawmill, Vyry as the couple's cook. Their combined salary of twenty-five dollars a month affords the family a degree of prosperity, but Vyry is wary of their neighbors. When Jacobson decides to relocate his lumber business deeper into the forest, Vyry persuades Innis not to follow the camp of roughneck loggers. To Innis's surprise, Jacobson agrees with Vyry, accepts Innis's resignation, and helps him locate a tract of public land to homestead. Vyry, however, experiences an unexpected backlash from Mrs. Jacobson for giving notice that she plans to stop working as cook—at least temporarily—to help her husband with their farm. The notion that Vyry should exercise autonomy in her own work schedule or prioritize her family's needs over those of her employer infuriates Mrs. Jacobson, who responds in a tirade against freedpeople.

Yet the wrath of the disgruntled employer is nothing compared to the terror of the Ku Klux



Klan. The white-sheeted riders kidnap one of the Browns' black neighbors and drag her into the woods, where they pour hot tar on her body and cover her with feathers. When she visits the woman to offer assistance, Vyry realizes that the woman is going to die and nothing can help her. Even if the hardened tar could be removed without ripping off the woman's skin, she would still be covered in burns where the hot pitch blistered her flesh. Shortly after they move into their new home—a fine new house constructed with lumber from Jacobson's mill—Vyry and Innis's family are targeted for harassment. One afternoon, three white boys walk into the house and frighten young Minna, who is home alone with Harry, the little brother born during the year of sharecropping. The arrival of Innis, Jim, and Vyry drives away the intruders, but two nights later, as the family return from church, they see horsemen erect a flaming cross in front of their burning house.

As Walker writes of the family's search for a home, she also tells the parallel story of Randall Ware's persecution by a local terrorist organization. When Ware returns to Georgia seven years after his departure, he finds the Dutton place abandoned. From the Duttons' doctor, Ware learns that Vyry has taken a new husband, a report he confirms by locating the marriage certificate at the courthouse. Randall Ware tells himself that if he had come directly to Dawson instead of stopping to attend the first convention of the state's black citizens, he might have returned in time to find his wife and children. During Innis and Vyry's search for a permanent home, Randall Ware is elected to the Georgia legislature and is among the black lawmakers expelled from that body by white supremacists. Walker's narrative rejoins Ware just after that expulsion, on the day he refuses to sell a piece of property to Ed Grimes. The Duttons' former overseer retaliates with a terror spree.

The violence begins when white-sheeted riders dump the body of Ware's journeyman, Jasper, at the blacksmith's feet. A bullet to the right temple is the apparent cause of death, but Jasper's body is bruised and bloody, suggesting he also suffered a brutal beating. Ware walks three-quarters of a mile and back to find someone to help him with Jasper's body. When the men return, Ware finds the body

missing and his place ransacked. At 4 a.m. the riders return and kidnap Ware to the woods, where they beat him unmercifully. Shortly after he makes his way back to his shop in the late afternoon, the riders return. Ware conceals himself in the water under the giant wheel of his grist mill while the men ransack his place a second time. The next morning, the Klansmen send the doctor as an emissary to secure Ware's consent to sell his land. The doctor also warns Ware that if he does not abandon his political endeavors, he is going to get himself "absolutely killed" (*Jubilee*, 394). Years earlier, as his free status became more and more tenuous, Ware told Vry "Before I'll take a master and become a slave, I'll die trying to stay free" (*Jubilee*, 153). After his confrontation with the Klan, Ware casts his ballot in the next election but cannot be persuaded to run for political office. He explains to his friend Turner, who encourages him to run, that the network of white supremacists is so pervasive, the government cannot be depended upon to protect Southern blacks. "They mean to enslave us again or kill us," Ware says. Reversing his earlier liberty-or-death stance for the sake of self-preservation, Randall Ware relinquishes both his land and his political aspirations.

As the terror of the Klan forces Ware to be more cautious, even timid, in his behavior, watching her home burn to the ground ushers in a new period of despair for Vry. Three weeks later, while still occupying a three-room shack in Luverne, where they have been temporarily relocated by the Freedman's Bureau, the family's sorrows are compounded by the death of the baby Vry is carrying. The arson that leaves the family homeless also serves as an omen that the joyous arrival of baby Harry cannot be repeated in a climate of racial hatred. Though it cannot be directly linked to the threat of terrorist violence, the fatal breach birth at Luverne is highly symbolic. The baby, a boy, is born foot-first with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. His death repeats the loss Vry suffered between Jim and Minna, of the baby she did not mourn but of whom she simply remarked "that was one who would never be a slave" (*Jubilee*, 151). Though Walker offers no details of the earlier fatality, the second baby's strangulation evokes the image of a noose and recalls the Fourth of July execution of the

two slave women.

Just as the birth conjures earlier incidents from the antebellum chapters, every recorded instance of Klan violence reenacts a death or injury from Vryy's life on the Dutton plantation. The beating and fatal shooting of Jasper duplicates Grandpa Tom's murder, probably because Tom's killer, Ed Grimes, is also the implied ringleader of the Dawson KKK. A similar concordance exists between the tar and feathering and Vryy's earlier discovery of Lillian lying unconscious with molasses and mattress feathers scattered about the room. The destruction of Vryy's home by fire recalls the burning of the slave cabins under Grimes's supervision and the deaths of Plato and Esau, who were trapped inside. Each episode of extralegal violence, each personal loss that Vryy endures during the Reconstruction years corresponds to some earlier trauma she felt or witnessed as a slave or, in the case of Lillian's attack, in the first days of freedom.

The morning after the fire, as Vryy searches through the rubble for whatever might be salvageable, she pours out her confusion and frustration to God. Her family has been "from pillar to post," she says, and just when she thought they could settle into a home, the Klan had "burned all we got to the ground." "Why, Lawd? Just tell me, why?" Vryy implores, as she tries to understand the will of God and the motives of her persecutors. All through her ruminations, Vryy's eyes are filled with tears. She resolves to go about her regular morning's work and cook breakfast for her family, but, writes Walker, "when she remembered she was standing in the ashes of her kitchen, she sank down to the ground and began sobbing again" (*Jubilee*, 381).

Innis finds Vryy rocking herself back and forth among the "smoking ruins" of their house. Ashes cover her clothes and face, which is also tear-stained and puffy from her long bout of crying. When Vryy asks what they will do, Innis is startled by the "abject hopelessness" in her voice (*Jubilee*, 381). Vryy moves the rest of the day "in a daze," much as she went about her life in the early days of motherhood, when freedom seemed unattainable. This day, Walker writes, Vryy is "frightened, tense,

bewildered, and deeply depressed” (*Jubilee*, 386). After losing the baby in Luverne, Vyry remains “dull and dour.” Just as Vyry had felt the earlier period of slavery was without hope or happiness, Innis finds that “there was no joy in his household” (*Jubilee*, 402). The family’s misfortunes in the early years of freedom, whether wrought by terrorists or accidents of nature, repeat the earlier calamities of Vyry’s slave life, while Vyry herself becomes withdrawn, emotionally dejected, and reluctant to build another house. Though Innis does not understand her hesitance and sometimes worries that “the fire had affected Vyry’s mind,” Vyry wants to be sure of their neighbors before they build again (*Jubilee*, 404).

When the Freedman’s Bureau finds land for the Browns to settle near the home of Lillian’s cousins, Vyry pays the Porters a visit, in part to see her half-sister, in part to ask the Porters’ help in checking over the deed to their new farm. Mr. Porter promises to see that the legal papers are in order and prevent another swindle like Pippins’s sharecropping contract, but seeing Lillian’s deterioration makes Vyry regret her call. With frazzled hair and worn, outdated dress, Lillian’s unkempt appearance matches her four years of mental decline. She does not recognize Vyry, and the only words she utters are in response to a thoughtless passerby who frightened Lillian one day by pointing and shouting “There’s a crazy woman.” Now, Lillian recites the same lines over and over: “I’m not crazy. I know who I am. I know my name. My name is Lillian” (*Jubilee*, 412). As the only living acknowledged Dutton child, this one-time belle personifies the ruins of the Old South and its slaveholding aristocracy; she is Walker’s counterpart to Faulkner’s Compson family. Lillian’s perseverations about her own sanity are the most obvious indication of a psychological disorder that remains undiagnosed but clearly suggests Walker’s correlation of memory, trauma, and repetition. Lillian’s trauma is bound up with the loss of the war and the four family deaths that happen in rapid succession. Vyry’s trauma is the totality of her slave experience, which repeats in the ordeals of Reconstruction and white supremacist efforts to re-enslave African Americans. Lillian’s brief reappearance in the narrative presages a more literal return of Vyry’s past, but not before her unexpected role as midwife fosters a sense of community with

her new neighbors and allays her fear of building another house.

### **New House, Old Horror**

Despite her continued reluctance to rebuild, the following spring renews Vyry's interest in tending her chickens and growing a garden. Vyry plans to use the proceeds from her egg and vegetable trade to realize her dream of sending her children to school. The children's education is a contentious issue between Vyry and Innis, who insists that he needs Jim to help him work the land. Vyry travels into town once a week to sell her fresh produce, and as her white customers engage her in conversation, she realizes they believe she, too, is white. Vyry maintains enough composure to listen to their racist remarks, as "She could never learn through a better way how her prospective neighbors felt about her race" (*Jubilee*, 419). The worst of what Vyry learns is a sickening account she overhears from a group of white men and boys bragging about the torture and murder of a black man.

The horrific story and the group's jocularity as they tell it only increase Vyry's anxiety, but after assisting with the birth of a child, Vyry receives an unexpected welcome from the white townspeople. While selling her goods, Vyry responds to the summons of a distressed husband whose wife has gone into labor before her own parent can arrive to assist with the birth. Vyry acts as midwife for the panicked first-time mother and helps deliver a healthy baby. After the birth, when the young patient repeats the absurd racial stereotypes she has heard from her husband, Vyry reveals her multi-racial identity in order to challenge the woman's outlandish impressions of black people. To educate her patient, Vyry reveals her biological relation to the master who never acknowledged her as his child. She also recounts her family's troubles as sharecroppers, the destruction of their home by arson, and her reluctance to rebuild near a town so hostile to its black neighbors. Later, the grateful grandfather of the new baby rides out to tell Vyry and Innis that he and an associate related the story of Vyry's

emergency obstetrical services to several townspeople who are also expecting. They agreed that they would like to have the Browns as neighbors and to have Vyry as their midwife. The new grandfather, a contractor by profession, offers to help Vyry and Innis build a new house. While the town's male residents offer their construction labor, the women hold a quilting bee, and Vyry serves her guests the best of her cookery. The all-day house raising serves as a highly symbolic occasion for building home and community.

The completion of their new home marks "the supreme fulfillment of all Innis Brown's hopes and desires," but for Jim, it inaugurates "a period of torture and unbearable labor" (*Jubilee*, 442-443). In his eagerness to make a good crop and reap a prosperous living from his land, Innis drives Jim to work as hard as Innis works. Even as a child, Jim expressed his dislike for field work. He longs to go to school but knows that his stepfather will not allow him to pursue his education as long as Innis needs his labor. Over the summer, tensions mount as Innis complains that his stepson does not work hard enough and Jim insists that Innis drives him to the point of exhaustion. Jim finds his stepfather's obsession with work unreasonable and unbearable. He compares himself and Innis Brown's use of his labor to a brute animal—a work-horse or mule—and concludes that under Brown's supervision, "It's just like slavery time round here" (*Jubilee*, 444).

The resentments reach a terrible climax in August, when Innis blames Jim for the accidental death of his prized sow. Innis is exuberant over the impending birth of a litter of pigs he expects to raise and sell for a substantial profit. Feeding and watering the hogs is Jim's responsibility, so when the pregnant sow fatally mires herself in mud, Innis irrationally blames Jim for the loss. Vyry is in the kitchen cooking lunch when Jim storms into the house, shirt torn, back bleeding. Between hysterical sobs, Jim screams incoherent threats to kill Innis Brown if he, Jim, doesn't get away from that house. While Jim collects his clothes, Innis follows him inside and threatens to beat him more. Blocking the path to Jim's room, Vyry grabs a cast-iron skillet and warns her husband that she will use it as a

weapon if he attempts to strike her son again. Beating her son won't revive the sow, Vyry tells Innis. Minna begs her stepfather not to kill Jim, but in his rage, Innis interprets her pleas as another challenge to his authority. "Git away from me with your sass," he tells her, "fore I slaps you in the mouth and knocks the fire out of you, too" (*Jubilee*, 449). Vyry declares that Innis will not strike her daughter unless it is "over my dead body" (*Jubilee*, 449). Innis replies with an outburst of grievances, including a sense of class disparity and feeling that his authority is not respected. Jim accuses Vyry of wanting her children to be educated like their "fine daddy." Innis says he knows of Vyry's secret plan to send Jim and Minna to school over his objections. He claims his spouse looks upon him as "an ignorant field hand" whom the family "despises" (*Jubilee*, 451).

The anxiety Innis betrays about Vyry's first husband foreshadows Ware's return, while for Vyry, Innis's violence against Jim calls up painful memories of bondage and of the calamities that have befallen her family in freedom. Jim talks of his stepfather's work regime as a form of slavery. As if to prove him right, Innis punishes the youth as Vyry has known slaves to be punished, indeed, as Vyry herself has been punished. When Jim charges into the kitchen, injured, sobbing and threatening murder, the incident conjures a past Vyry "thought she had forever escaped" (*Jubilee*, 453). For Vyry, "It brought back all the violence and killing on the plantation when Grimes was driving and beating the field hands to death" and much more:

It brought the horror of the deaths of Mammy Sukey, and Grandpa Tom, the branding of Lucy, and the burning of the old men to death, the plague, and the hanging, murder, and fire, when the slaves all knew their lives were not worth a copper cent with a hole in it. It went back to the war and all the bloody fighting and killing and dying, the death of all her master's family one by one, and the final assault on Lillian that had left her mind wounded for life. It was part of all the turbulence of the Ku Klux and the fire and all the evil hatred she had felt before the house was built here (*Jubilee*, 453).

As Vyry relives her past in memory, she worries that the same "awful hatred and violence" might now "destroy her happy home and her loving family" (*Jubilee*, 453). She prays a fervent prayer that "peace [will] come in our hearts again" (*Jubilee*, 455).

Soon after, Vyry tells Jim that she doesn't blame him for taking a stand and saying what he would not tolerate, something Vyry says she has never been able to do; but she also warns her son against clinging to his bitterness. She espouses what will eventually become her model, not only for her family dispute but for the collective experience of slavery: "Keeping hatred inside makes you git mean and evil inside. We supposen to love everybody like God loves us. And when you forgives you feels sorry for the one what hurt you, you returns love for hate, and good for evil" (*Jubilee*, 457). Jim listens to his mother's message and reassures her. He says he "might even get so I can stand Innis Brown and think about loving him" but warns that it would be "a long, long time before [he] gets a heart that big" (*Jubilee*, 457). Contrary to Jim's prediction, he and Innis reconcile just as Jim prepares to leave to attend school.

### **A Shared Experience**

If the clash between her husband and son conjures recollections of the traumas of her life during and after slavery, Vyry comes face to face with her past the day Randall Ware walks up her lane. Ware learns the whereabouts of Vyry and her family from Mr. Porter, who pays the Browns a visit en route to Dawson, where he attempts to stop Ed Grimes, now the local banker, from taking possession the abandoned Dutton plantation. While the old Dutton overseer's ascent to power reflects the social reorganization of the Reconstruction period and, most likely, acquisitions made through his terrorist activities, Porter's well-timed visit in the days following Jim's beating allows him to see the young man's injuries, meet Randall Ware in Dawson, and relay the first news Ware has had about his family in five years. Acting on Porter's report and concern for Jim's safety, Ware arrives to take Jim away to school. After twelve years, the sudden reappearance of the spouse Vyry never quite gave up for dead introduces the uncomfortable problem of bigamy and the need for Vyry to choose between two



husbands.

With Innis Brown and Randall Ware each asserting a claim as Vyry's true, legal spouse, the tension escalates until the conversation inadvertently turns to their postwar encounters with the Ku Klux Klan. The enmity between the two rivals diffuses as the two men articulate their common experience of terror and intimidation. In the course of their conversation, however, Randall Ware espouses a distrust he applies generally to all whites. He is skeptical of the motives of the white neighbors who helped the Browns build their new home. Recalling Vyry's white ancestry, he accuses her of loving the white race more than black people. Ware implies Vyry's subservience to whites and her betrayal of blacks.

Vyry reminds Ware that he owes his financial wealth to his white friends and benefactors, the Quaker Randall Wheelright and abolitionist Bob Qualls. Vyry renounces Ware's bitterness and declares her refusal to teach her children hatred. In response to Ware's charge of favoring whites, Vyry recounts the catalog of torture and humiliation she endured from Salina Dutton. She also relates the reality of her relationship with the white father who never acknowledged her as his child nor attempted to stop the beating she suffered when she was captured as a runaway. As soon as she utters the words, Vyry realizes she has never spoken of the beating to Ware or Brown, but having told of her torture, she cannot stop there. She exposes her back, which bears the physical scars of her beating. Answering Ware's accusations with the same philosophy of love and forgiveness she preached to her son, Vyry applies the principles of the Brown family quarrel to the cruelty of the slavery regime and to race relations in the post-emancipation era. Stating her philosophy in terms of her vocation as a cook, if anyone who mistreated her as a slave came to her door hungry, Vyry says, she would feed them (*Jubilee*, 485). "I believes in God," she declares, "and I believes in trying to love and help everybody" (*Jubilee*, 485). That, Vyry says, is her doctrine, and the one she will preach to her children. Walker clearly means for the sermon to be prescriptive as she writes that Vyry "was only a living sign and

mark of all the best that any human being could hope to become. In her obvious capacity for love, redemptive and forgiving love, she was alive and standing on the highest peaks of her time and human personality.” According to Walker, “out of outrage and violence and bitterness,” Vyry espouses a message of “Christian love and forgiveness.” That climactic moment is a product of the author’s upbringing. Though she never knew the real Vyry (Margaret Ware Brown), Walker recognized these qualities in her mother, in the grandmother (Elvira Dozier) who told her the story, and in her own world view.<sup>55</sup> “*Jubilee* grows out of my family beliefs,” said Walker, who as a daughter and granddaughter of ministers, found it impossible to “write a book that is not influenced by Christian theology and by Christian faith.”<sup>56</sup> At the same time, Vyry’s message is also consistent with the non-violent protest tactics and philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose leadership Walker admired. “He says ‘We preach agape,’” Walker wrote of King, “and of course that is divine and forgiving love which he says helps us love and forgive our enemies, while at the same time not liking their sin and challenging their consciences.”<sup>57</sup> While Vyry’s message reflects Walker’s family background, it is also consistent with the ideology of the civil rights movement.

On their way home from driving Ware and Jim to the train station, Vyry tells Innis of the baby she is expecting. Hetta’s death from childbirth at the beginning of *Jubilee* serves as a window into the experience and abuse endured by women in slavery. After Vyry’s midwifery facilitates the Brown’s welcome into the community, the impending birth at the end of the novel gestures toward the contentment Vyry feels in the final pages. *Jubilee* ends with Vyry feeding her chickens and remembering herself as a ten-year-old on the morning she watched the Central of Georgia train and

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<sup>55</sup> “Southern Song: An Interview with Margaret Walker,” interview by Lucy. M Frieber in Graham, *Conversations with Margaret Walker*, 104.

<sup>56</sup> “An Interview with Margaret Walker Alexander,” interview by Kay Bonetti, in Graham, *Conversations with Margaret Walker*, 131.

<sup>57</sup> Walker, Journal 68, p.127 <http://margaretwalker.jsums.edu/u/?uy,13933>.

longed for her freedom. As she goes about her chores, calling her own chickens, having finally realized that freedom, Vryy feels an inexpressible peace (*Jubilee*, 497).

## Chapter 5

### William Styron, *Ten Black Writers*, and the Battle Over *Nat Turner*

While Americans observed the Civil War centennial and fought for civil rights, William Styron was hard at work on one of the most controversial novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In October 1967, after a turbulent summer with riots in Newark and Detroit, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, about an 1831 slave revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, was published to mostly positive reviews. By the time the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize the following year, the book had incited a critical backlash. After a public debate between Styron and historian Herbert Aptheker over the novel's historical accuracy, several black intellectuals denounced the book as racist and argued that it perpetuated negative black stereotypes.<sup>1</sup> Their criticisms culminated in a volume of essays, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writer's Respond*. In response, historian Eugene Genovese defended Styron's work in *The New York Review of Books*, and debate over the novel continued apace in the pages of newspapers and magazines. Since then, the controversy has been thoroughly documented in works such as Albert E. Stone's *The Return of Nat Turner*, Charles Joyner's essay "Styron's Choice," and Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives*. During the writing of *The Confessions* and later during the debates over the reception, Styron expressed admiration for the scholarship of historian Stanley Elkins, and to some degree, Styron adopts Elkins's interpretations of the power dynamics between masters and slaves. Contrary to some erroneous criticism, Styron represents slavery as an oppressive and brutal institution; however, his representation of bondspeople, via slave narrator Nat Turner, is often degrading and filled with the character's loathing for other slaves. Styron's attempt to explain the development of the revolt plan frames Turner's rebellion partly as a response to slavery's oppression but more as the product of

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<sup>1</sup> John Leo, "Some Negroes Accuse Styron of Distorting Nat Turner's Life," *New York Times*, February 1, 1968, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

the psychological effects of slavery—what Styron describes as a generalized madness and hatred that result from the intimacy of the master-slave relationship.

In “This Quiet Dust,” first published in the April 1965 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, Styron traced his interest in Turner’s revolt to a cursory reference in a state history textbook he read as a child. The passage captivated him, he said, precisely because it was so brief.<sup>2</sup> In 1992, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the novel’s publication, Styron recounted a more detailed story about the origins of his interest in the Turner revolt. Styron’s grandmother was born in 1850 on a North Carolina plantation. As an elderly woman in her eighties, she related to her grandson how in 1862, Union soldiers “swept down on the plantation, stripped the place bare, and left everyone to starve.” Styron’s grandmother owned two slaves, Drucilla and Lucinda, who were approximately the same age as the young mistress. According to Styron, the grandmother spoke “at great length of her love for these children” as well as the “horror and loss” she felt when they later disappeared, presumably to pursue lives as free people, separate from their former owners.<sup>3</sup> Later in high school, when he traveled to Southampton County for athletic events, Styron took note of a highway marker that briefly recounted the history of Turner’s revolt, a story deeply at odds with his grandmother’s recollections of slavery. He began to ask, “What was the connection, if any, between her loving memories and this cryptic notation of terror and mayhem?” He also began to wonder whether that violent uprising more than a century earlier “didn’t reflect something sinister” in the segregated South of his youth—a place he describes as “outwardly peaceable yet, except to the blind, troubled and jumpy with signs of resentment, sullenness, covert hostility and anger.”<sup>4</sup>

Styron’s idea to write a novel about the revolt dated to the late 1940s, when he read the

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<sup>2</sup> William Styron, “This Quiet Dust,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 1965, 135.

<sup>3</sup> William Styron, “Nat Turner Revisited,” *American Heritage*, October 1992, <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/nat-turner-revisited>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

statement recorded by the lawyer Thomas Gray in 1831 while Nat Turner awaited trial. “It was the book I wanted to write when I started out writing,” Styron told George Plimpton in a *New York Times* interview around the time of his novel’s release, “and yet something inside me was hesitant and reluctant.” Styron said he was not yet equipped to deal with such a weighty topic and was, at the time, too focused on the carnage of the revolt. After finishing his first novel *Lie Down in Darkness*, Styron pitched the idea of the Turner novel with “full bloodcurdling delight” to his editor Hiram Haydn who warned, “I don’t think you have a real understanding of the thing.”<sup>5</sup> Styron wrote two more novels, *Set this House on Fire* and *The Long March*. Then in 1962, while reading Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*, Styron was struck by “the poignancy of the condemned man sitting in his jail cell on the day of his execution” and realized the same scenario could be used as a framework for the story of Nat Turner.<sup>6</sup> He wrote *The Confessions of Nat Turner* from the summer of 1962 to the winter of 1966.<sup>7</sup>

Of the historical sources dealing with the revolt, the most important for Styron was the statement recorded by Thomas Gray and published in a pamphlet after Turner’s death under the same title Styron chose for his novel. Some of Styron’s strongest critics would later claim a preference for Gray’s portrayal of Nat Turner, which they considered a more dignified characterization of the rebel leader. Gray prefaced his document with assurances that it was a true and exact account of Turner’s words; the signatures of five justices of the peace attested to this claim. Accepting these truth assertions at face value, critics also compared Styron’s novel with Gray’s *Confessions* as if the latter were an unassailable text and the standard by which to measure the historical authenticity of Styron’s work. In the wake of the Styron controversy, Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender challenged this view of Gray

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<sup>5</sup> George Plimpton, “William Styron: A Shared Ordeal,” *New York Times*, October 8, 1967, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Taylor, “The Contentions of William Styron: The Novelist Responds to Critics of ‘Nat Turner,’” *Boston Globe*, April 20, 1969, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Boston Globe.

as a “blank-faced scrivener.” They perceptively characterized Gray as a “very shrewd man who knew precisely what he was doing and why.” They understood his *Confessions* to be a “political document in the most basic sense of the word.”<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Gray’s *Confessions* portrays Nat Turner as a precocious child who was thought to possess the gift of prophecy. In Gray’s text, Nat Turner self-reports that at the age of three or four, he could describe incidents that happened before he was born, though he should have had no knowledge of the events. Turner’s mother and father affirmed a belief in his prophetic abilities as well as the notion that their son was “intended for some great purpose.” By Gray’s account, Turner acquired literacy “with the most perfect ease”; and though he did not remember actually learning the alphabet, Turner recalled that, as a child, when he was shown a book to stop him from crying he began to spell the words before him. His owner and visitors who observed his “uncommon intelligence for a child” predicted that Nat would “never be of any service to anyone as a slave.”<sup>9</sup> The 1831 *Confessions* connects Turner’s plan for insurrection to his self-image as a prophet and the divine will revealed to him by “The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days.” Placed under the supervision of an overseer, he ran away and remained in the woods for thirty days but returned because the Spirit appeared to him and directed that he return to his “earthly master,” for which he was chastised by his fellow slaves. After the runaway attempt, the account of Turner’s prophecy grows more apocalyptic, like when he purportedly has a vision of “white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heaven, and blood flowed in streams.” In May of 1828, Turner says, he was told through divine communion that “Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of man” and that Nat himself should “take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time

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<sup>8</sup> Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender, “History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner,” *American Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (October 1971): 492, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711703>.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Gray, 1831, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>.

was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first” At this point, Gray interjects, “Do you not find yourself mistaken now?” Turner’s answer—“Was not Christ crucified [?]”— suggests that even after the bloody revolt, he perceived himself as a Christ figure and his impending execution as tantamount to Christ’s crucifixion. In an essay that appeared both in *Ebony* magazine and *Ten Black Writer’s Respond*, Lerone Bennett, Jr. related this exchange between Gray and Turner with a subsequent description of Turner “still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him; clothed with rags and covered with chains; yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man.” While Gray adds that this image of Turner made his blood curdle, Bennett interprets Turner’s gesture as an affirmation of Turner’s noble resistance, and charged that in Styron’s novel “there is not one single image to compare with Gray’s image of the defiant black rebel raising his manacled hands to heaven.”<sup>10</sup> Herbert Aptheker similarly noted the absence of Turner’s reply, “Was not Christ crucified?” from Styron’s novel, but neither critic perceived the implicit argument by which Gray attempts to discredit Turner.<sup>11</sup> The supposed justification for the revolt— that Christ had abandoned mankind and Turner was acting as His successor—contradicts the central tenant of Christianity. It suggests that Turner presumed himself the equal or even superior of Christ and casts his revolt as the ultimate Christian sacrilege. Though they also note how the tableau was later reinterpreted to suggest the opposite of Gray’s argument—as with Bennett’s reading—Gross and Bender aptly describe Gray’s portrait of Turner one of a “bloody fiend with his manacled hands raised blasphemously to heaven.”<sup>12</sup>

Though Turner ran away as a direct response to the authority of the overseer, Gray’s text specifically makes clear that mistreatment by Turner’s owner did not provoke his revolt. According to

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<sup>10</sup> Lerone Bennett, “The Case Against Styron’s Nat Turner,” *Ebony*, October 1968, 157, EBSCO MasterFILE Premier (49006739); “Nat’s Last White Man,” *Ten Black Writers Respond*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Aptheker, “A Note on the History,” *The Nation*, October 16, 1967, 375, EBSCO Nation Archives.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 499.



Gray, Turner describes his then-owner Joseph Travis as “a kind master” who “placed the greatest confidence in me.” Turner adds that he “had no cause to complain of his [Travis’s] treatment” then relates how he and his co-conspirators met to plan their revolt. For his part in the murders, Gray’s record shows Turner to be the mastermind who rarely carries out the actual violence. Once because it is purportedly too dark for Turner to land a death blow and once because his sword is too dull, the co-conspirator Will carries out the killings. At other times, Turner sends his best armed recruits ahead on horseback and arrives on foot just as the violence has concluded. The one murder for which Turner does take credit is committed by bludgeoning the young woman with a fence rail. That act is related with the same detached matter-of-fact tone as other instances of violence. “I sometimes got in sight in time to see the work of death completed, viewed the mangled bodies as they lay, in silent satisfaction, and immediately started in quest of other victims,” Gray’s Turner relates. “Having murdered Mrs. Waller and ten children,” he continues, “we started for Mr. William Williams’—having killed him and two little boys that were there; while engaged in this, Mrs. Williams fled and got some distance from the house, but she was pursued, overtaken, and compelled to get up behind one of the company, who brought her back, and after showing her the mangled body of her lifeless husband, she was told to get down and lay by his side, where she was shot dead.” In Gray’s text, the narration attributed to Turner is so dispassionate as to seem completely disassociated from the fatal violence it recounts. “If these are indeed Turner’s words,” write Gross and Bender, “then he has given us a devastatingly effective self-portrait of a man who, through a sense of divine mission, has rendered himself unavailable to normal human feelings.”<sup>13</sup>

While Gray frames his record of Turner’s confession as a warning to public safety, his editorial comments also emphasize that the slave uprising was an isolated incident, confined to the community in Southampton County, and not motivated by “revenge or sudden anger, but the results of a long

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 497.

deliberation” and a “gloomy fanaticism.” After his record of Turner’s confession, Gray offers a sympathetic account of how three people managed to survive the assault. After her sister was murdered in the same room, one woman, who was not discovered in her hiding place, was “carried off, and concealed for protection by a slave of the family.” In contrast to the tone of Turner’s statement, Gray relates an inflammatory account of how another survivor, from her hiding place, “heard their blows, and the shrieks of the victims of these ruthless savages.” In his analysis of Gray’s 1831 *Confessions*, Daniel Fabricant similarly observes the contrast between the “horror Gray expresses” and the statements attributed Turner, which are related “in the flat, detached tone of some serial killer or Nazi doctor, devoid of any feeling, emotion or humanity.” Gray’s text, Fabricant aptly observes, portrays Nat Turner as “as a deluded fanatic, wholly outside the contemporary white understanding of a beneficent master-slave relationship.”<sup>14</sup> Portraying the revolt as the product of “religious madness,” and recounting the “ghastly details of the massacre,” Gross and Bender argue, Gray “is supplying his readers with the means for removing it from the structure of the slave-master relationship.”<sup>15</sup> Thomas Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* reads like propaganda designed to quell fears of widespread slave revolt. Gray assures readers that the Southampton revolt was an isolated event conceived by a misguided heretic. The statement attributed to Turner attests that he was kindly treated by his master, while the slave who protects the surviving member of the Whitehead family affirms the loyalty of slaves to their masters. In other words, according to Gray, slavery remained a paternalist institution, and Turner’s revolt offered no reason to rethink that concept of human bondage. Insisting that “the hand of retributive justice” had dealt with the insurrectionists—meaning the danger had passed and warranted no further anxiety—Gray’s text sought to exculpate slavery and slaveholders

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel S. Fabricant, “Thomas R. Gray and William Styron: Finally, A Critical Look at the 1831 Confessions of Nat Turner,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 37, no. 3 (July 1993): 342, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/845661>.

<sup>15</sup> Gross and Bender, “History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner,” 494.

from any culpability in Turner's revolt.<sup>16</sup>

Styron's novel reflects his skepticism about the accuracy of the 1831 text and Gray's reliability as amanuensis. Styron's Gray, who in the novel is also Nat Turner's defense lawyer, reads aloud the recorded statement to verify its accuracy.<sup>17</sup> He pauses to explain that the document does not consist of Turner's "exact words" but rather Gray's own "reconstitution and *recomposition*." The fictional Gray claims to have added a "dignity of style" that a court confession requires and that he found lacking in their original conversations. He asks Turner to explain certain inconsistencies, like the fact that Nat was only directly responsible for one murder—that of Margaret Whitehead—and why he would "butcher in cold blood" a master who, by Nat's own admission, treated him kindly. Nat provides no answers but reflects that "there were matters which had to be withheld even from a confession and certainly from Gray."<sup>18</sup> Quoting liberally from *The Confessions* of 1831, Styron positions his novel as a counterpoint to a narrative he suggests as unreliable both for its lack of completeness and for Gray's liberties in composing the account.<sup>19</sup> Toward the end of the novel, Styron's Turner recollects a conversation in which Gray probes for some sign of remorse. "As I spoke," recalls Turner, who claims to feel no guilt, "I saw that Gray was glaring at me, and I wondered just how much of the truth I was telling him might find its way into those confessions of mine that he would eventually publish" (*Confessions*, 393).

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<sup>16</sup> Fabricant similarly concludes that Gray's text "serves a twofold purpose: It seeks to quell fears of widespread slave conspiracies while reaffirming for whites their perceived intellectual and moral superiority over blacks, which, in their minds, justified slavery as a necessary social and economic institution." Fabricant also recognizes and approves of Styron's challenge of Gray's text; Fabricant, "Thomas R. Gray and William Styron," 332-361, 342, 355.

<sup>17</sup> The portrayal of Gray as Styron's defense lawyer borrows from a common misstatement in Nat Turner's scholarship; the real Thomas Gray served as legal counsel for other slaves charged in the revolt, but he was not Nat Turner's lawyer; see *Ibid.*, 333, 335.

<sup>18</sup> William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967; New York Vintage Books, 1999), 34. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Confessions*.

<sup>19</sup> In a 1966 interview, Styron spoke of his intention to create "a kind of ironic counterpoint" between *Gray's Confessions*, which he found to contain "a lot of white man's hokum" and the story Styron relates in his own novel; see Robert Canzoneri and Page Stegner, "An Interview with William Styron," in *Conversations With William Styron*, ed. James L. West (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 71-72.

Against Gray's 1831 *Confessions*, Styron positions his narrative as an unmediated version of the slave rebel's story, narrated by Nat Turner himself. When Styron's Gray reads the official statement back to Turner in the jail and again during the court proceedings, the narration of Styron's Turner digresses from the confession of record into a counternarrative of Turner's psychological experience of enslavement, false prophecy, and forbidden attraction to the one person he kills in the revolt.

In "This Quiet Dust," Styron describes a trip to Southampton County to search for local landmarks related to the revolt. He met one man who remembered the oak tree from which the real Nat Turner was hanged, but it had been cut down thirty years earlier. Toward the end of the visit, Styron spotted a familiar tableau of a house and surrounding woods. He had seen it before in a turn-of-the-century photograph included in William Drewry's *The Southampton Insurrection*. Styron recognized the house, which was now being used as a corncrib, as the former home of Catherine Whitehead, where Nat Turner carried out the only murder he is known to have committed during the uprising.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that Margaret Whitehead was the only person Turner killed presented something of a mystery to Styron, who was also intrigued by Turner's claims that he had tried to kill other people but his earlier attempts were thwarted by obstacles—bad lighting and a dull sword—that did not hinder his coconspirators. While Styron doubted the general credibility of Gray's account, he thought the explanations as to why Turner committed so few acts of violence seemed particularly suspect. Styron's theory was that Turner "was suddenly overtaken by his own humanity."<sup>21</sup> In Styron's novel, Turner tries to kill his master with an ax blow, misses, and cannot bring himself to make a second attempt. After watching his fellow conspirators carry out the bloody work, Styron's Nat begins to doubt the righteousness of his mission but then takes the life of Margaret Whitehead. Styron's explanation for

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<sup>20</sup> William Styron, "This Quiet Dust," *Harper's Magazine*, April 1965, 145.

<sup>21</sup> George Plimpton, "William Styron: A Shared Ordeal," *New York Times*, October 8, 1967, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

that, probably the single most controversial element of the novel, is that Nat Turner was “motivated by the ultimate in sexual frustration.”<sup>22</sup> In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* shortly before the novel’s publication, Styron said, “I can’t believe he killed her because he hated her. I believe he killed her because he loved her and wanted to possess her.”<sup>23</sup>

While the murder of Margaret Whitehead serves as the narrative climax of the novel, the earlier sections deal with Nat Turner’s religious crisis and legal trial; the novel then turns to an autobiographical account that begins in Nat’s childhood and culminates in a full account of the revolt, including the details he withholds from Gray. As in the 1831 account, Styron’s Turner believes that he has been directed by God to carry out the revolt. He hears voices and experiences visions he believes are imparted by God. The Turner of Gray’s *Confessions* goes to the gallows as certain as ever of his actions, but Styron’s Turner, by the end of the first section, realizes the revolt was not divinely ordained. Consistent with Gray’s *Confessions*, Styron’s Turner is literate and deeply religious, but as a prisoner awaiting trial, he feels so alienated from God, he cannot pray. Even his attempt to recite a Psalm, he says, turns “foul and sour in my mouth and as meaningless and empty as all my blighted attempts at prayer” (*Confessions*, 10). The problem is not a loss of faith or desire to pray; Turner retains both but says he could not have felt more estranged had he “been cast alive like some wriggling insect beneath the largest rock on earth” (*Confessions*, 10). Throughout the first section, Nat complains of physical hunger, which he also transfigures to represent his longing for a Bible, which he is denied during his incarceration. Even when he requests one through his lawyer, after the trial, the magistrates vote four to one to deny the request on grounds that slaves should not be able to read and they have never permitted a condemned slave the use of a Bible. When he falls asleep in court, Turner dreams he

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<sup>22</sup> Maria Clara Moyano, “Speaking Volumes: The Confessions of William Styron,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1967, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

is searching for his Bible and comes to a group of black men trapped in quicksand, whom he is powerless to help. Earlier when Gray reads back the confession, Nat can no longer bear to hear the account and screams, “Yes we done it! We done what had to be done! But stop recitin’ about me and Will!” (*Confessions*, 39). During the trial, he becomes suddenly fearful about the prospect of dying when he is unable to pray. After his conviction, Turner learns of the white backlash that followed his revolt. In reaction to the rebels’ murders of local whites, 131 innocent slaves and free blacks were murdered by the mob that “roamed Southampton for a solid week searching vengeance” (*Confessions*, 113). Gray informs Turner that his revolt has assured the defeat of abolition. As Turner relates in an earlier passage, the Biblical prophet with whom he most identified was “Ezekiel with his divine fury.” Ezekiel’s words, more than those any other prophet, seemed to reveal God’s will for Turner’s mission. At the end of the novel’s first section, however, when Turner is confronted with his uprising’s catastrophic consequences for fellow slaves, his sense of divine alienation is explained by the epiphany that the violence he orchestrated was not, as he believed, ordained by God. “And if what I did was wrong,” Turner asks, “is there no redemption?” (*Confession*, 115).

In interviews, Styron characterized Turner as a “religious fanatic” and his novel, to a limited degree, as a “religious allegory,” in which Turner, “an old Testament prophet” comes to accept New Testament principles of love and redemption through Christ.<sup>24</sup> While Styron’s novel does ultimately condemn the revolt in religious terms, he does not explain the rebellion as solely the result of religious fanaticism. In the second wave of criticism that followed the initial success of the novel, Styron was accused of being an apologist for slavery. In reality, Styron’s *Confessions* at times shows slavery to be an oppressive, dehumanizing institution, and its brutality is a factor in Turner’s motivation for revolt. When he initially became interested in the subject, Styron found not only a dearth of information on Turner’s revolt but on slavery in general. Even after significant controversy had developed around the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

book, Styron said he was glad he delayed writing the book so many years after the idea for the novel occurred to him because “the work required a sound understanding of slavery.” For Styron, the “breakthrough” came from reading Stanley Elkins’s *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. As Styron explained in a 1969 interview, “He [Elkins] said essentially, that what white people did was worse than you imagine. It was massive psychological disaster, the absolute power of the closed system to mutilate and humble a race. He made us rethink assumptions about the effects of the system on the psyche of the slaves. Elkins took a long step in the always tentative search for the truth. He cleared the air for me.”<sup>25</sup>

In *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, Stanley Elkins attempts to reframe the scholarly discussion of slavery, which he characterizes as a long running debate about the morality of slavery—whether its existence was right or wrong. Summarizing the arguments of Ulrich B. Phillips, the once influential historian who portrayed slavery as a benign, paternal institution and slaves as content and childlike, Elkins wrote, “The basic assumption in [Phillips’s] *American Negro Slavery* was that of innate and inherited racial inferiority. There is no malice toward the Negro in Phillips’ work. Phillips was deeply fond of the Negroes as a people it was just that he could not take them seriously as men and women: they were children.”<sup>26</sup> In the subsequent debate over Styron’s *Confessions*, critics of the novel, in a somewhat misleading fashion, equated the work of Styron and Elkins with that of Phillips. In an attempt to pursue a new line of inquiry, Elkins compares the institutional structure of slavery in the United States with that in Brazil and the Spanish colonies of the New World. Elkins explains that the lifelong generational bondage that developed in the United States did not develop in Brazil or Latin America. Elkins distinguishes between that “open system,” where the

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<sup>25</sup> Taylor, “The Contentions of William Styron.”

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 3rd edition (1959; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 10.

enslaved have social connections beyond the master – slave relationship and the “closed system” that developed in the United States, which reduced slaves to the status of property and endowed the slaveowner with absolute authority; however Elkins relied on a portrait of benign Latin American slavery that was eventually refuted.<sup>27</sup> Elkins then turns to the question of slave personality types, particularly the stereotype of the docile, childlike “Sambo,” and attempts to account for the existence of that type, which Elkins finds present in the U.S. but not in slave societies of Latin America. Turning to psychoanalytic studies of Holocaust survivors, Elkins attempts to draw an analogy between the experience of former concentration camp prisoners and U.S. slaves in order to suggest that the traumatic experiences of enslavement and living under a brutal regime could have affected slaves’ personalities to the point that it rendered childlike behavior.<sup>28</sup> Writing more than forty years earlier, Phillips had attributed the behavior of “Sambo” to an innate racial inferiority that he also used to portray slavery as a positive and necessary institution. The implication of Elkins’s argument is that if slaves did exhibit docile or childlike behavior or paternalist dependence on the master, it was the psychological response to the brutal institutional structure of U.S. slavery. Yet Elkins’s presumption that psychological studies about concentration camp survivors could be used interchangeably to draw conclusions about people enslaved by a different institutional structure on a different continent in different centuries is a deeply problematic methodology. He also essentially validated the characterization of “Sambo,” even as he argued that slaves who exhibited “Sambo”-like behavior did so as a direct psychological response to the brutalizing institutional structure of slavery.

William Styron publicly declared his admiration for Elkins as early as 1963. When Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts* was reissued that year on the twentieth anniversary of its publication, Styron reviewed it for *The New York Review of Books* and inserted himself into the debates

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<sup>27</sup> Hugh Tulloch, *The Debate on the American Civil War* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.



of academic historians. Styron's review acknowledged Aptheker's work as a repudiation of historians like Ulrich B. Phillips, who, as Styron aptly explains, "saw in slavery a generally genial institution, the victims of which were more or less content with their lot and in any case so docile by nature as to be incapable of rebellion." According to Styron, "Aptheker offers convincing proof that some slaves, at least, were not only discontented, but through courage and out of desperation found opportunity to make their forsaken bids for freedom." Yet he also asserts that the book's title is "badly misleading" and suggests "*Signs of Slave Unrest*," might have been more appropriate. "Of unrest and disaffection there seems to have been a natural plenty"; writes Styron, "of true rebelliousness on any organized scale there was amazingly little." Citing the rebellions of Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey, which were quickly quelled, as the only exceptions, Styron states the position he later asserts in his novel's preface, that "there was only one sustained, effective revolt in the entire annals of slavery: the cataclysmic uprising of Nat Turner in Virginia in 1831." Styron then turns to what he considers the "brilliant analysis" of Stanley Elkins's *Slavery*. Styron is persuaded by Elkins's arguments about the "traumatizing effect upon the psyche of this uniquely brutal system," which, according to Styron, "dehumanized the slave and divested him of honor, moral responsibility, and manhood." Like Elkins, Styron accepts the "Sambo" stereotype of the docile...childish... irresponsible," slave as an accurate representation of enslaved people but considers the stereotype a testament of the destructive power of an institution that "managed to cow and humble an entire people." He refuses to recognize how the "Sambo" stereotype demeans the people who endured slavery.<sup>29</sup>

When it was published in the fall of 1967, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was initially well received by most reviewers. Eliot Fremont-Smith, of *The New York Times*, devoted two consecutive

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<sup>29</sup> William Styron, "Overcome," *The New York Review of Books*, September 26, 1963, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1963/sep/26/overcome>.

columns to Styron's book, which he judged a "triumph" and a "magnificent novel."<sup>30</sup> In the *Wall Street Journal*, Edmund Fuller hailed the book as "a powerful, brooding, sometimes horrifying, always eloquent novel, [that] captures as perhaps no other single book, the overwhelming historical tragedy that was slavery."<sup>31</sup> In *The New York Review of Books*, Philip Rahv began his review by pronouncing Styron's *Confessions*, a "first-rate, novel, the best that William Styron has written and the best by an American writer that has appeared in some years." *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Rahv wrote, "incarnates its theme, bringing home to us the monstrous reality of slavery."<sup>32</sup> In the *Chicago Tribune*, Alfred Kazin admired Styron's creation of "a man whom the locked-up force of daily, hourly, constant suppression has turned into a Stranger—someone who remains single, separate, wholly other from ourselves and our notions."<sup>33</sup> For Kazin, Styron's inability to reconcile Nat Turner's "tortured self" and "violent self" made the novel seem authentic; but for Poppy Cannon White, of the *New York Amsterdam News*, it was the novel's "basic flaw." While she praised the novel as "a remarkable document—a richly embroidered tale of the slave revolt lead by a brilliant, tortured man," White raised issues with the psychological portrayal of the novel's narrator and protagonist. "Nat Turner is a madman," White wrote. "It is impossible to identify with him, or to understand the tortured workings of a mind that is often poetic and sensitive but psychotic." Likening *The Confessions of Nat Turner* to *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote's 1965 novel about a quadruple murder in rural Kansas, White found Styron's *Confessions* to be "a journey into the world of a mind unhinged." In her view, the narrative

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<sup>30</sup> Eliot Fremont-Smith, "Books of the Times: 'The Confessions of Nat Turner' – II," *New York Times*, October 4, 1967, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>31</sup> Edmund Fuller, "Power and Eloquence in New Styron Novel," *The Wall Street Journal*, October, 4, 1967, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Wall Street Journal.

<sup>32</sup> Philip Rahv, "Through the Midst of Jerusalem," *The New York Review of Books*, October 26, 1967: <http://www.nybooks.com>.

<sup>33</sup> Alfred Kazin, "Instinct for Tragedy: A Message in Black and White," *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1967, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

defied logic. The novel, she added, “wallows in violence.”<sup>34</sup> In his review for *New Republic*, historian C. Vann Woodward judged *The Confessions of Nat Turner* “the most profound fictional treatment of slavery in our literature.” He acknowledged that except for “a few scraps of evidence,” Styron’s depiction of Nat Turner’s “life and motivation” lacked “historical underpinnings”; but Woodward also ventured that “most historians would agree” Styron’s narrative was “not inconsistent with anything historians know.”<sup>35</sup>

One historian who disagreed was Herbert Aptheker. In *The Nation*, Styron’s novel received two evaluations, one a literary review by Shaun O’Connell, the other an assessment of the novel’s historical accuracy by Aptheker. The author of *Nat Turner’s Rebellion* and *American Negro Slave Revolts* identified several “discrepancies” between the actual revolt and Styron’s novel. In Aptheker’s view, the inconsistencies amounted to “consequential distortion.”<sup>36</sup> Aptheker identified significant biographical facts from Gray’s 1831 *Confessions* that Styron either omitted or altered. In Gray’s text, Turner, whose father also fled slavery, relates the story of his own runaway attempt and criticism he endured from fellow slaves upon his return. That detail, missing from Styron’s novel, is important, says Aptheker, as “evidence of the impact upon Turner of the anti-slavery feelings present among his peers.” Aptheker also highlights Styron’s reimagining of Nat Turner’s family relations. In the statement made to Thomas Gray, Nat Turner mentions his mother, father, and grandmother as influences in his early life. In Styron’s rendering, Nat was too young when his father ran away to have any clear memory of his absent parent; he also imagines that Turner never knew his grandmother, who in Styron’s novel dies only a few days after giving birth to Nat’s mother. For deviating from the family history given in

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<sup>34</sup> Poppy Cannon White, Poppy’s Notes, “Confessions of Nat Turner,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 25, 1967, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News.

<sup>35</sup> C. Vann Woodward, “Confessions of a Rebel: 1831,” *The New Republic*, October 7, 1967, 25, 28, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (10397721).

<sup>36</sup> Aptheker, “A Note on the History,” 375.

Gray's *Confessions*, Aptheker accused Styron of recasting the Turner family to conform to the Moynihan report. That controversial document, issued by the Department of Labor in 1965, argued that the socio-economic disadvantages faced by African Americans as a social group could be traced to widespread instability of the black family, specifically to matriarchal family structures and the absence of black fathers.<sup>37</sup> In his review of Styron's *Confessions*, Aptheker also criticized Styron for having his Nat reject the Great Dismal Swamp as a slave refuge when in reality the swamp was home to communities of fugitive slaves that used it as a base to raid nearby plantations. Aptheker insisted that the Turner rebellion must be understood as "the culminating blow of a particular period of slave unrest," a context, he implies, Styron fails to convey. The review culminates in the charge that Styron adheres to Stanley Elkins's version of slavery, clearly a contemptible offense in Aptheker's estimation. Aptheker quotes from Styron's review of *American Negro Slave Revolts* to demonstrate the novelist's acceptance of Elkins's "Sambo" slave stereotype, which Aptheker quite rightly rejects as a demeaning caricature. He then goes on to cast Styron in the company of academic historians whose work Aptheker made a career of refuting. Styron's *Confessions*, wrote Aptheker, "reflects the author's belief that the views of slavery in the United States associated with the names of Frank Tannenbaum and Stanley Elkins—which, *in substance*, are those of U.B. Phillips, the classic apologist for slavery—are valid." It is important to note that Aptheker went on to discuss that assertion specifically as it pertained to "Sambo," but Aptheker's statements appear to have been, if not the origin, then at least an early version of the charge that Styron was an apologist for slavery. In many ways, Styron's representation of enslaved people is problematic in the extreme, but of all the criticisms leveled against Styron and his novel, deserved or not, perhaps the single most disingenuous charge was that Styron was an apologist for slavery.

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<sup>37</sup> "The Negro Family: the Case for National Action," Office of Planning and Policy Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965, <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>.

After Aptheker's initial October article, *The Nation* followed up in April with a second article by Aptheker and a rebuttal from Styron. In this round of debate, historian and novelist squabbled over Styron's decision to make Nat Turner single and the reliability of sources suggesting the real Turner was married. The exchange also quotes from a private correspondence between the two men dating to 1961 and suggests residual ill will over Styron's request to read Aptheker's then-unpublished manuscript about the Turner revolt. The manuscript was returned with a letter of thanks and praise, but Styron later refused to let Aptheker quote his remarks as an endorsement of the book. In his column for *The Nation*, Styron explained that the letter exaggerated his admiration for Aptheker's work.<sup>38</sup> Though the discussion seemingly devolves into an airing of personal grudges, at the center of the Styron-Aptheker dispute were conflicting historical interpretations of slavery. Their public derision of each other's work essentially rested on contradictory estimations of the validity of Stanley Elkins's scholarship.

The second Styron-Aptheker exchange appeared shortly after Beacon Press published a volume of criticism, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. While the volume's contributors reiterate or expound on many of the criticisms already raised by Aptheker, the book's central organizing theme is that Styron's novel contradicts an image of Nat Turner collectively held by African Americans—that of noble black leader and warrior against slavery. In his introduction, the volume's editor, John Henrik Clarke writes that the contributors share the opinion “the Nat Turner created by William Styron has little resemblance to the Virginia slave insurrectionist who is a hero to his people.”<sup>39</sup> In “Nat's Last White Man,” Lerone Bennett, Jr. asserts that the historical record supports a view of Turner as a “virile, commanding, courageous figure.” He charges that Styron

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<sup>38</sup> Herbert Aptheker, “Truth & Nat Turner: An Exchange,” *Nation*, April, 22, 1968, 544, EBSCO Nation Archives; William Styron, “William Styron Replies,” *Nation*, April, 22, 1968, 544, EBSCO Nation Archives.

<sup>39</sup> John Henrik Clarke, introduction to *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), vii.

“wages literary war on this image” by “substituting an impotent, cowardly, irresolute creature of his own imagination for the real black man who killed or ordered killed real white people for real historical reasons.” He considers Styron’s character “not only the antithesis of Nat Turner” but “the antithesis of blackness.” Bennett describes Styron’s Turner as a “Hamlet-like white intellectual in blackface,” and suggests him as a stock figure in Styron’s fiction.<sup>40</sup> Arguing that, “The man reported by Gray far overshadows the character created by Styron,” Vincent Harding finds Styron’s *Confessions*, “an exercise in domestication, assimilation, and finally destruction.” Harding faults Styron for his failure to “comprehend Nat Turner’s real stature and meaning” and says the novelist “does not perceive Turner’s role as a tragic-triumphant hero in the biblical genre.”<sup>41</sup> Ernest Kaiser agreed. “Styron,” Kaiser wrote, “cannot see Turner as the hero he was and as the Negro people see him; a slave who led a heroic rebellion against the dehumanization of chattel slavery.”<sup>42</sup> Loyle Hairston charged that Styron had reduced “one of the most spectacular revolts against American slavery” to “wanton savagery.” Complaining that “The brave Nat Turner’s ‘mission’ is given no broader interpretation than bloody revenge,” Hairston believed this amounted to “thinly veiled slander, a malicious attempt to revoke [Turner’s] credentials as an authentic hero in mankind’s struggle against tyranny.”<sup>43</sup>

In his introduction, Clarke asks, “Why did William Styron create *his* Nat Turner and ignore the most important facts relating to the real Nat Turner?”<sup>44</sup> Like Aptheker, the contributors to *Ten Black Writer’s Respond* object to Styron’s reconfiguration of the Turner family and Turner’s familial

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<sup>40</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Nat’s Last White Man,” in Clarke, *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Vincent Harding, “You’ve Taken My Nat and Gone,” in Clarke, *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Ernest Kaiser, “The Failure of William Styron,” in Clarke, *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, 57.

<sup>43</sup> Loyle Hairston, “William Styron’s Nat Turner – Rogue-Nigger,” in Clarke, *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Clarke, introduction to *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, vii.

relationships. The change, they argue, suggests Turner's master as the most influential figure in his early life and diminishes the role of the black family.<sup>45</sup> For Clarke, however, the most important fact Styron disregarded, or at least the first one he mentions, is that Nat Turner was married. His main source for this claim was an account by Thomas Wentworth Higginson; at the time, the existence of Turner's wife was a matter of dispute, but the discovery of primary sources, including newspaper accounts published after the revolt and Styron's handwritten notations suggest that Turner was indeed married and that Styron was aware that Turner had a spouse.<sup>46</sup>

In *Ten Black Writers Respond*, Nat's contested marital status is subsumed in a broader condemnation of how Styron depicts Turner's sexual experience. Somewhat understating this aspect of the novel, Clarke writes, "Styron [made] Nat Turner a celibate with a rising lust for what he has called 'a pure white belle with swishing skirts.'"<sup>47</sup> Styron's Nat Turner also has a sexual encounter with another male slave, engages in violent sexual fantasies about white women, and at one point is beset by an impulse to rape Margaret Whitehead. Objecting to the novel's emphasis on Nat's relationship to Whitehead, Lerone Bennett, Jr. argues, "By this method, Styron shifts the focus of the Turner insurrection, downgrading the main issues (white oppression and black liberation) and elevating the white woman to a position of central importance."<sup>48</sup> At times, however, the arguments reveal less about the problems of the novel than the writer's view of gender identity. Bennett also sees Styron's focus on sexuality as a means of "emasculating Nat Turner," of "defusing Nat sexually" by imagining

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<sup>45</sup> Bennett, "Nat's Last White Man," 8; Mike Thelwell, "Back With the Wind," in Clarke, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, 83.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Joyner, "Styron's Choice: A Meditation on History, Literature, and Moral Imperatives," in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 196; Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 78.

<sup>47</sup> Clarke, introduction to *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, vii.

<sup>48</sup> Bennett, "Nat's Last White Man," 6-7.

him as an “impotent, sex-crazed celibate” who engages in onanistic fantasies about white women.<sup>49</sup> Alvin F. Poussaint infers Styron’s message to be that “Nat Turner was not a man at all” but that he was “unconsciously really feminine.” According to Poussaint, “Styron underscores this image by depicting Turner as a bungling, awkward soldier who is unable to kill his oppressors and pukes at the sight of blood during combat.” Poussaint believes this suggests “that the whole revolt against slavery and racism was somehow illegitimate and ‘abnormal.’”<sup>50</sup> Loyle Hairston also notes Styron’s fantasies about white women and similarly argues that by turning his character into a “religious celibate” Styron imposes on Turner “a kind of self-castration.” Hairston pities “poor” Nat Turner, whose “only sexual experience is—alas!—a *homosexual* one!”<sup>51</sup> The writers define masculinity in terms of heterosexual sex and the ability to kill without compunction; anything else not only divests Turner of his masculinity but, according to Poussaint, also makes him contemptuously womanlike. Any reticence about committing violence becomes a sign of weakness and evidence of incompetent soldiering, both of which the contributor casts as feminine traits. In attempting to excoriate Styron for supposedly emasculating Turner, some of the opinions expressed in the volume, which includes not a single female contributor, advance a concept of masculinity that is disparaging to women and disdainful of homosexuality. The contributors do, however, rightly suggest that the novel evokes racist sexual stereotypes, as when Poussaint refers to the myth that “the black man’s innermost desires” are “to sexually possess a white woman.” As he aptly reminds readers, that was “the theme of the great racist classic, *The Birth of a Nation*, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan.”<sup>52</sup>

As a group, the contributors to *Ten Black Writer’s Respond* accuse Styron of character

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>50</sup> Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D., “The Confessions of Nat Turner and Styron’s Dilemma,” in Clarke, *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Hairston, “William Styron’s Nat Turner—Rogue-Nigger,” 71.

<sup>52</sup> Poussaint, “The Confessions of Nat Turner and Styron’s Dilemma,” 20.



defamation. According to Clarke, the “contributors...collectively maintain that the distortion of the true character of Nat Turner was deliberate.”<sup>53</sup> Clarke’s reference to Turner’s “true character,” like his attempt to distance Styron’s creation from “the real Nat Turner” seeks to discredit Styron’s narrative and advance the contributors’ heroic view of the slave rebel as the only authentic version of Nat Turner. Clarke further attempts to legitimize the contributors’ interpretation of Turner by conflating it with historical record. “Why,” asks Clarke, “did he [Styron] ignore the fact that Nat Turner had a wife whom he dearly loved?”<sup>54</sup> While surviving documents may confirm the existence of a spouse, Clarke’s characterization of Turner’s marital affection is most likely his own deduction. In his analysis of the debate, Charles Joyner finds that “[the contributors’] version of history, like Styron’s, was painfully ill-informed.”<sup>55</sup> The Ten Black Writers, Joyner observes, did not write as scholars but polemicists, who “apparently entertained the delusion that historical research consisted of no more than reading *American Negro Slave Revolts*....”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Aptheker’s body of work, including his early review of Styron’s *Confessions* for *The Nation*, seems to have served as the main historical source for many of the contributors.<sup>57</sup> Examining published slave narratives and interviews with ex-slaves conducted by the Federal Writer’s Project, Joyner interrogates the ten respondents’ claims that a heroic Nat Turner exists in “the living traditions of black America.” Joyner concludes that the African American oral tradition in which the ten writers’ ground their heroic view of Turner, is “an invented tradition.” According to Joyner, the narratives support neither Styron’s nor the ten respondents’ version of

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<sup>53</sup> Clarke, introduction to *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, viii.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Joyner, “Styron’s Choice: A Meditation on History, Literature, and Moral Imperatives,” 199.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 198-199.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

Turner.<sup>58</sup> In the Federal Writer's Project interviews, ex-slaves rarely acknowledged having heard of Turner. A few recalled hearing stories from their parents but offered no details beyond identifying Turner as the leader of slave rebellion.<sup>59</sup> Contrarily, while researching the case and compiling the most comprehensive collection of documents related to the Southampton revolt, Henry Irving Tragle concluded, "it possible to say with certainty that Nat Turner did exist as a folk-hero to several generations of black men and women who have lived and died in Southampton County since 1831."<sup>60</sup> If Turner did occupy a place in African American oral tradition, Tragle's findings seem to suggest that the influence may have been localized near the area of Virginia where the revolt occurred.

Recalling Styron and Aptheker's negative reviews of each other's work, the contributors to *Ten Black Writer's Respond* condemned Styron's adherence to Stanley Elkins's slavery thesis. Mischaracterizing both the Styron's and Elkins's texts, Lerone Bennett charged Styron with "trying to prove that U.B. Phillips, the classic apologist for slavery, and Stanley Elkins, the sophisticated modern apologist, were right when they projected Sambo—the bootlicking, head-scratching child-man—as a dominant plantation type."<sup>61</sup> Quoting from Styron's review of *American Negro Slave* revolts, Ernest Kaiser found the review—and presumably Styron's view of slavery—"a 20- or 30-year throwback to the racism and paternalism of the 1930s and 1940's." He went on to characterize Styron's *Confessions* as "a witches' brew of Freudian psychology, Elkins's 'Sambo,' thesis on slavery and Styron's vile racist imagination that makes especially Will and Nat Turner animals or monsters."<sup>62</sup> The arguments

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 199-200.

<sup>59</sup> See for instance, Rev. Frank T. Boone, vol. II Arkansas Narratives, Part 1, p. 208; Bernice Bowden, vol. II Arkansas Narratives, Part 6, p.360; Anna Washington, vol. II Arkansas Narratives, part 6, 46; and Daniel Goddard, vol. XIV, part 2, p.150 in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/mesnbibVolumes1.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Irving Tragle, introduction to *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831* (1971; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 12.

<sup>61</sup> Bennett, "Nat's Last White Man," 7.

veer into baseless territory when Loyle Hairston accuses Styron of reinforcing a portrait of slavery as a benign institution while portraying Turner's revolt as "a worse crime than slavery."<sup>63</sup> Mike Thelwell specifically takes issue with the figure of Samuel Turner, whose plantation "rivals Tara in its gentility, charm, and benevolence of the 'Old Dominion' version of slavery, surely the least oppressive serfdom in mankind's history."<sup>64</sup> Whatever else Styron's novel does, it portrays slavery as an oppressive institution. Samuel Turner's benevolence is ultimately undermined by his failure to keep his promise of manumission, which is also a major factor in Nat's motivation for devising the revolt. While the novel does ultimately condemn the rebellion's violence with Turner's post-revolt religious crisis, rejecting murder as means of resistance hardly constitutes a de facto endorsement of slavery.

More presciently, the writers identify the racist attitudes Styron attributes to Turner. As Lerone Bennett writes, Styron imbues Turner "with an immense loathing for black people" whom the character often describes in dehumanizing terms.<sup>65</sup> Additional objections included a restatement of Aptheker's assertion that other slaves did not assist in quelling the rebellion as Styron imagines in the novel.<sup>66</sup> Some, however, were more personal, as with the John Oliver Killens, who declared, "He [Styron] is still in desperate need of emancipation from his slavemaster's psychology. He remains until this very day an unreconstructed southern rebel." Of the novel, he wrote that "in terms of getting into the slave's psyche and his idiom, it is a monumental failure."<sup>67</sup> Ernest Kaiser denounced "The unspeakable arrogance of this young southern writer daring to set down his own personal view of Nat's life as from

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<sup>62</sup> Kaiser, "The Failure of William Styron," 57.

<sup>63</sup> Hairston, "William Styron's Nat Turner—Rogue-Nigger," 67.

<sup>64</sup> Thelwell, "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner, 84.

<sup>65</sup> Bennett, "Nat's Last White Man," 9.

<sup>66</sup> Thelwell, "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner," 90.

<sup>67</sup> John Oliver Killens, "The Confessions of Willie Styron," in Clarke, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, 43.

inside Nat Turner in slavery!” Condemning Styron’s portrayal of black characters, Kaiser wrote, “All of the Negro stereotypes are here: the filthy, racist language of American whites: nigger, nigger on almost every page, black toadeater, darky, pickininny, ginger-colored Negro with thick lips.” Kaiser noted how Styron repeatedly mentions his characters’ black color; and indeed as he narrates the novel, Styron’s Nat Turner is more likely to refer to bondspeople by evoking race or color than referring to their legal status of enslavement.<sup>68</sup> “If this book is important,” wrote Mike Thelwell, “it is so not because it tells much about negro experience during slavery but because of the manner in which it demonstrates the persistence of white southern myths, racial stereotypes, and literary clichés even in the best intentioned and most enlightened minds.” Thelwell asserted that the “largely uncritical acceptance” of these myths and stereotypes “in literary circles shows us how far we still have to go.” According to Thelwell, “The real ‘history’ of Nat Turner, and indeed of black people, remains to be written.”<sup>69</sup>

After the publication of *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, debate over the novel continued in the editorial pages of newspapers and magazines. As that response has been documented elsewhere, we turn now to a close reading of Styron’s novel.

### **William Styron on the Psychology of Slavery**

Stanley Elkins’s influence is evident in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as Styron considers the psychological effects of slavery. Unlike Elkins, Styron’s Turner characterizes the psychological effect of enslavement as a form of “madness” that in certain extreme cases drives bondspeople to react with violence. At the time of the revolt, Turner belongs to the fifteen-year-old Putnam Moore, who inherited

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<sup>68</sup> Kaiser, “The Failure of William Styron,” 56.

<sup>69</sup> Thelwell, “Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner,” 91.

the bondsman when the boy's father died in a farm accident; but since Putnam is a minor, his stepfather, Joseph Travis, exercises legal authority over Nat. His status as "a kind of twofold property" is, according to Nat, "additionally unsatisfying to property already half deranged at being owned even once" (*Confessions*, 44).

About a year before the revolt, Jeremiah Cobb, the judge who eventually presides over Nat's trial, visits the Travis property, where Nat explains to him how mourning for his lost family has affected Nat's fellow slave Hark. "On the outside he's very cheery," Nat says of his friend, "but inside he's just all torn up." During a period of financial hardship, Travis sold most of his slaves, who were taken to Mississippi. Among them were Hark's wife and son, who was three or four years old at the time. "Hark cared for that little boy almost more than anything," says Nat. When the child was sold away, Hark nearly "went mad with grief, couldn't think about anything else" (*Confessions*, 72-73). As a result, Hark still has trouble concentrating, forgets to do his chores and suffers punishment for his perceived slackness (*Confessions*, 72). Though Travis does not permit his slaves to be whipped, Putnam and another member of the household, Maria Pope, punish Hark by forcing him to climb a tree and remain there until he appears in danger of falling.

Recalling his evaluation of potential recruits, Turner also relates the background of Nelson, a man who has had at least six masters and whom Turner describes as "Weary and sick—close to madness—of bondage" (*Confessions*, 100). His current master once tried to whip Nelson, who, according to Nat "struck him back full in the face, and said that if he tried it again he would kill him." Acting from "frightened retaliation and hatred," the master now works Nelson like two men and "feeds him on the nastiest kinds of leavings and slops" (*Confessions*, 100). Recalling Will, whom Nat does not want to include in his plan and who eventually rivals Turner for leadership of the revolt, the narrator explains that "although like Nelson he has been driven half crazy by slavery, Will's madness...has the frenzied, mindless quality of a wild boar hog cornered hopelessly in a thicket, snarling and snapping its

brutish and unavailing wrath” (*Confessions*, 102). A habitual runaway, who once went missing for six weeks, Will suffers under the slave breaker Nathaniel Francis, who, according to Nat, “has beaten [Will] into some kind of stunned and temporary submission” (*Confessions*, 102). Shortly before the revolt, Will finally retaliates during one of the regular beatings. Though Turner’s uprising, followed by an indiscriminate backlash against slaves and free blacks, is the deadliest manifestation of slavery’s violence, Nelson and Will’s resistance—perhaps even Hark’s forgetfulness—suggests the constant and frequently violent power negotiations that occurred between masters and slaves. The physical abuse their masters inflict clearly provoke Nelson and Will’s reprisals.

While the narrator’s account of Nelson, Will, Hark, and himself suggests “madness” as the common psychological effect of enslavement, one could also argue that Hark’s overwhelming grief or Nelson and Will’s impulses toward self-defense are quite reasonable under the circumstances. Even more problematic, however, is the means by which Styron attempts to explain how and why Turner conceived a plot to murder the white residents of Southampton. Styron’s Turner speaks of the “central madness of nigger existence,” which he defines as, “beat a nigger, starve him, leave him wallowing in his own shit, and he will be yours for life. Awe him by some unforeseen hint of philanthropy, tickle him with the idea of home, and he will want to slit your throat” (*Confessions*, 69-70). In a 1963 interview, Styron related this concept to a statement by Frederick Douglass that Styron paraphrased as “beat a slave, treat him like a dog, terrorize him, brutalize him, and he will be your slave for life. Treat him with some decency, treat him with respect, and he will want to kill you.”<sup>70</sup> Styron almost totally misconstrues what Douglass wrote in his 1855 autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. After his brutalizing experience with notorious slave breaker Edward Covey, Douglass was hired out to a situation he considered “a vast improvement” over life at Covey’s; yet in these more tolerable conditions, Douglass was “still restless and discontented.” He soon began to think of the future and

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<sup>70</sup> James Jones and William Styron, “Two Writers Talk it Over,” in West, *Conversations with William Styron*, 45.

entertain dreams of freedom. Douglass offers the following explanation of his psychological experience:

When entombed at Covey's, shrouded in darkness and physical wretchedness, temporal well-being was the grand *desideratum*; but, temporal wants supplied, the spirit puts in its claims. Beat and cuff your slave, keep him hungry and spiritless, and he will follow the chain of his master like a dog; but, feed and clothe him well,—work him moderately—surround him with physical comfort,—and dreams of freedom intrude. Give him a *bad* master, and he aspires to a *good* master; give him a good master, and he wishes to become his *own* master. Such is human nature. You may hurl a man so low, beneath the level of his kind, that he loses all just ideas of his natural position; but elevate him a little, and the clear conception of rights rises to life and power, and leads him onward.<sup>71</sup>

Douglass's narrative illustrates how the brutal treatment of masters like Covey—or in Styron's novel, Nathaniel Francis—attempts to dehumanize bondspeople, but Douglass also attests to slaves' irrepressible humanity and longing for freedom. While borrowing the premise that less brutal treatment made slaves more inclined to resist their bondage, Styron inexplicably transforms Douglass's desire for freedom into an impulse to kill one's master. By the time Styron's Turner articulates the “central madness” of slave life, replete with racial epithet, he has distorted Douglass's account to the point that any perceived kindness on the part of the slaveholder becomes a provocation for murder. Styron later explores his assertion in terms of a master's unfulfilled promise to manumit Nat. But to explain why the denial of freedom leads Nat Turner to conceive a deadly revolt, Styron merges his arguments about the destructive psychological effects of slavery with a story of false prophecy and Nat's relationship to Margaret Whitehead.

During his jail cell ruminations, Styron's Turner also articulates a dehumanizing metaphor for the lives of black people. He ponders the condition of a fly and first thinks it “one of the most fortunate of God's creatures” for being able to live, reproduce, and die “brainless, unacquainted with misery or grief” (*Confessions*, 26). On second thought, he considers that flies may be “God's supreme outcasts,” consigned to a “more monstrous hell” than any “human misery.” Turner imagines “an existence in

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<sup>71</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 150.

which there was no act of will, no choice, but a blind and automatic obedience to instinct which caused him [the fly] to feast endlessly and gluttonously and revoltingly upon the guts of a rotting fox or bucket of prisoner's slops." He pronounces this "the ultimate damnation: to exist in the world of a fly, eating thus, without will or choice and against all desire" (*Confessions*, 27). Turner's ruminations then turn to the slave's existence and a former master's observation of the rarity of slave suicide. Formerly, Turner attributed this circumstance "in the face of such adversity" to the slave's "Christian faith" and "understanding of a kind of righteousness at the heart of suffering, and the will toward patience and forbearance in the knowledge of life everlasting, which swerved him away from the idea of self-destruction" (*Confessions*, 27). In his jail cell, Turner rejects that former theory and concludes, "It seemed rather that my black shit-eating people were surely like flies, God's mindless outcasts, lacking even that will to destroy by their own hand their unending anguish" (*Confession*, 27). In the culmination of his analogy, Turner thus implies the condition of slaves to be that of "God's supreme outcasts," consigned to a "monstrous hell" of abject existence without volition. As much as this characterization condemns slavery for reducing slaves to a state of abjection, it also reflects a loathing of the enslaved, which Styron's Turner expresses throughout the novel. Turner articulates a similar attitude at a church service where the black congregants appear to Nat "as meaningless and as stupid as a barn full of mules." He concludes, "I hate them one and all" (*Confessions*, 104). While Styron portrays slavery as an institution that is often brutal and dehumanizing, he seems also to suggest, by the racism the narrator has internalized and by the language Nat uses to describe other slaves, that the effect of that brutalization is absolute. In his misrepresentation of Frederick Douglass, Styron expunges any trace of the slave's enduring humanity, which Douglass suggests as the source of the slave's desire for freedom and willingness to resist bondage. In his creation of a fictional narrator, Styron imagines a Nat Turner who reviles both slavery and the enslaved, whom Nat rarely regards as anything other than subservient, dimwitted, and bestial.



## The Making of an Insurrectionist

In the novel's second section, Styron's Nat Turner narrates his early life and education, as well as a promise of freedom betrayed. A favored house slave and the son of a slave cook, Nat traces his position in the Turner household to the fate of his maternal grandmother, who was kidnapped from the Gold Coast and pressed into slavery at age thirteen. Thinking of his grandmother on the day of her purchase by Alpheus Turner, Nat imagines her pregnant and terrified by a belief that she was "about to be eaten" (*Confessions*, 130). In Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots*, the Middle Passage survivor Kunta Kinte likewise fears that he will be killed and eaten by his captors. In both instances, the slaves' fear of cannibalism reverses what in American literature has traditionally stood for white anxiety about racial acculturation.<sup>72</sup> According to Styron's narrator, the grandmother's child—Nat's mother—was "publicly begat upon the same slave ship [that carried the teenager from her home] by some unknown black father" (*Confessions*, 130).<sup>73</sup> In the grandmother's experience, Styron offers yet another extreme example of slavery's destructive psychological effect. Already "driven crazy by her baffling captivity," the young slave, really only a child herself, was "sent into frenzy" by her baby's birth and "tried to tear it to pieces" (*Confessions*, 130). Afterward, she "[fell] into a stupor" until she died a few days later. In the story of the girl who endures enslavement, rape, and pregnancy, followed shortly by death, Styron suggests a devastating physical and psychological toll on the enslaved. The inscription on her grave marker offers barely a clue to the girl's ordeal. It bears her name, "Tig," age, thirteen, and the epitaph, "Born an heathen died baptized in Christ...R.I.P." Even this record of her life is obliterated when the old graveyard is cleared for use as a sweet potato field. Nat recalls being drawn to the gravesite and the

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<sup>72</sup> Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>73</sup> Styron's account needs further explanation. It is unclear if he means to imply an assault by a black crew member or a forced coupling with a fellow captive or if he was simply unaware that male and female slaves were separated.

strangeness of being thirteen-year-old boy pondering the death of his grandmother at the same age.

The grandmother's attempt at infanticide, together with a few passages about Nat's own mother, constitute the entirety of the novel's concern either with slave motherhood or the experience of female slaves. One of these episodes involves young Nat secretly witnessing his mother's sexual assault by the overseer McBride. While young Nat hears his mother's initial rebuff and observes a "shrill, angry," quality of her voice, which is also "edged with fear," most of the conversation is inaudible, until the child runs around to the kitchen and observes his mother and McBride on a table in the pantry. While Turner later notes his mother's "basic unwillingness," his account significantly understates the coercive and exploitative nature of the incident (*Confessions*, 175). John Henrik Clarke observes in his introduction to *Ten Black Writer's Respond*, "Nat's mother, according to Styron's account, enjoys being raped by a drunken Irish overseer."<sup>74</sup> Darwin T. Turner charged that the scene reinforced the stereotype of the promiscuous black woman. "When the overseer rapes Turner's mother," Darwin Turner wrote, "she responds so satisfactorily that the delighted overseer declares a holiday for the remainder of the day. Although she was physically forced to submit, her subsequent calmness proves that the incident has not troubled her."<sup>75</sup> Daniel W. Ross later examined this scene as the origin of Turner's misogyny, his onanistic fantasies mostly involving white women, and his "obsessive association of violence and sex."<sup>76</sup> Ross illustrates how the primal scene with Nat's mother is subsequently repeated in instances of Nat's voyeurism and "fantasies of sexual release [that] emphasize his victim's pain because he has learned to associate the inflicting of pain with power."<sup>77</sup> In his

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<sup>74</sup> Clarke, introduction to *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, viii.

<sup>75</sup> Darwin T. Turner, review of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, by William Styron, *The Journal of Negro History* 53, no. 2 (April 1968): 185, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2716491>.

<sup>76</sup> Daniel W. Ross, "'Things I Don't Want to Find Out About': The Primal Scene in the Confessions of Nat Turner," *Twentieth Century Literature* 39, no. 1 (Spring, 1993), 86, 92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441639>.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 91

reading, Ross recounts Lou-Ann's initial resistance, McBride's physical threat of holding a broken bottle to her neck, and the sudden change in McBride's demeanor when "the violent rapist turns courter, promising to buy his 'victim' earrings rather than threatening her with force."<sup>78</sup> Ross aptly notes that Styron's portrayal suggests Lou-Ann "finds pleasure in this coupling." He also observes Nat's "perception that sexuality, which at first seems to make the mother a victim, actually endows her with power."<sup>79</sup> Ross further explains, "In Nat's recollection woman is degraded at the beginning of the scene, but orgasm reverses the situation, shattering phallic power." According to Ross, witnessing this scene leads Nat to "realize the power can be transferred from oppressor to victim, that fulfillment of an aggressor's desire can leave the aggressor vulnerable" which enables Nat to conceive a revolt that "will make himself and his fellow slaves agents of power."<sup>80</sup> While Ross's reading aptly characterizes the fictional Nat Turner's understanding of sex and power—reiterated in a later episode when Nat becomes the target of sexual harassment—Ross delineates what is in fact a deeply problematic depiction of sexual exploitation. As Clarke and Ross both observe, Styron does make Lou-Ann appear to derive pleasure from the assault. Styron inverts the power dynamic of the coercive sexual relationship with the suggestion that rape somehow constitutes an empowering experience for the victim and a forfeiture of power by the rapist.

A childhood conversation in which young Nat presses his mother for information about his father's escape from slavery reveals a family history of resistance. Thomas Gray's 1831 text noted that Nat's father had fled from slavery, but apparently not before both parents as well as Nat's grandmother provided strong childhood influences. Styron's detractors criticized his decision to restructure the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 81

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 82

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 85

family so that Styron's Nat had no memory of his grandmother or his father.<sup>81</sup> In Styron's *Confessions*, Nat's mother reveals that shortly after the death of Alpheus Turner, the eldest son Benjamin, openly criticized Nat's father. The elder Nathaniel mocked the criticism, for which Benjamin Turner struck the bondsman across the mouth in view of the rest of the Turner family. Declaring that he could not tolerate being struck, Nathaniel resolved to escape to Philadelphia, where he planned to make enough money to free his wife and son. Though he never contacted his family, Nathaniel also is not known to have been recaptured. Nat's last recollection of his mother, who died when he was fifteen, is of her grave marker. Bearing the name "Lou-Ann Turner," it allowed the master's surname to assert ownership over her even in death.

As the son of the Turners' slave cook and a house slave himself, Nat's position affords educational opportunities from a master who encourages his literacy and assures that Nat has an opportunity to learn the carpenter trade. As a child, Styron's Turner, in perhaps his earliest act of rebellion, steals a copy of *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* from his master's library. He attempts to teach himself to read with little success. When he is found to possess the missing book, his master is so impressed by the child's ambition for literacy, Nat is not punished for the theft but rewarded with reading lessons. Careful not to overstate his master's magnanimity, Styron's Turner casts his education as an extension of the chattel relationship. He reflects that "despite warmth and friendship, despite a kind of *love*, I began as surely an experiment as a lesson in pig-breeding or the broadcasting of a new type of manure" (*Confessions*, 155). With his education undertaken by members of the Turner family, young Nat enjoys a privileged position within the household: "I became in short a pet, the darling, the little black jewel of Turner's Mill" (*Confessions*, 169). As with the master's motives for his education, Turner's characterization of himself as a "pet" evokes his favored status but also equates the literate slave child with a domesticated animal. The narrator's reflections on his former relationship with the

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<sup>81</sup> Aptheker, "A Note on the History," 375; Bennett, "Nat's Last White Man, 8-9; Thelwell, "Back With the Wind," 82-83.

slaveholding Turners thus criticize what might otherwise be misinterpreted as slaveholder benevolence. Even the most uncommon acts of patronage tend to reinforce, rather than dispel, slavery's objectification of bondspeople. The narrating Turner also implies disdain for the behavior of his former child self whom he describes as "the household's spoiled child, a grinning elf in a starched jumper who gazed at himself in mirrors, witlessly preoccupied with his own ability to charm" (*Confessions*, 169). Young Nat is apparently all too eager to please his white masters and all too impressed with his ability to do so. His attraction to mirrors suggests not an impulse toward self-analysis, but narcissism on the part of the child who also regards the enslaved mill workers and field laborers as "creatures beneath contempt." When an injured field hand appears at the edge of the veranda asking for a poltice, young Nat, like the slave butler of Thomas Sutpen's youth, scornfully directs him "toward the proper rear door." When slave children venture onto the lawn of the big house, Nat, wielding a broomstick, shouts them away with "shrill cries of abuse" (*Confessions*, 169). Young Nat thus becomes the enforcer of class divisions toward his fellow slaves. While the narrator acknowledges this attitude as the result of childish "ignorance and self-satisfaction," the adult Turner retains his sense of classism.

Nat Turner's disdain for his former relationship to the master's family is likely the result of the lofty expectations Samuel Turner fostered in the precocious youth but ultimately failed to fulfill. At age sixteen, Nat is apprenticed to a master carpenter. At eighteen, he learns of Samuel's long-term plan to hire Nat to a Richmond architect, allow him to keep half his wages "in savings for the future," and emancipate him at age twenty-five. Nat describes his initial reaction as one of "ingratitude, panic, and self-concern" (*Confessions*, 194). The very prospect of leaving the security of Turner's Mill elicits "homesickness so keen that it was like bereavement" (*Confessions*, 194). Nat initially rejects the path to freedom that Samuel Turner offers and tells his master that he does not want to be sent to Richmond. Samuel Turner, who reveals his plans on a trip to town, correctly predicts that Nat will soon feel differently; but their encounter with a slave coffle on the return to Turner's Mill portends that Samuel

Turner's promise will never be fulfilled. Talking with the driver, Samuel is astonished to learn that the slaves are from a plantation he knows and that it has become the most recent estate to disband as a result of the financial crisis that plagues the Tidewater section of Virginia.

The first inkling that the crisis has beset Samuel Turner is the surreptitious sale of several slaves, including one of Nat's close companions, whom Nat unwittingly delivers into the hands of the slave trader. Nat befriends Willis, his replacement at the mill, after Nat is reassigned to spend half his day as the assistant driver. At one point, the pair engage in a sexual act, after which Nat prays and baptizes them both. According to the narrator, "loving him [Willis] so much, loving him like a brother," Nat felt a responsibility to "do everything within my power to assure his [Willis's] own progress in the way of the Lord" (*Confessions*, 207). Nat begins to teach Willis to read and write in the hope that he might follow the same path to freedom offered to Nat. He also begins to oversee Willis's religious instruction. After Samuel Turner grants permission for Willis to accompany Nat to a camp meeting, Nat is charged with delivering a group of slaves who reportedly have been hired out and discovers Willis among them. Not only will Willis be unable to attend the meeting, the term of his hire might last a year or longer. Disheartened at the prospect of being separated from Willis, Nat completes the transfer and realizes only afterward that the slaves were not hired but sold. Samuel Turner correctly discerns that Nat suspects him of betrayal and feels guilty that Willis probably thinks his friend an accomplice to the deception. Samuel says he had not known Willis was the slave who was supposed to accompany Nat to the revival, nor had he known of their friendship. Samuel says if Nat had complained to his master after the sale, he would have taken steps to recover Willis, who was chosen precisely because he was young, single, and thought to have had no social attachments. Willis's sale is only the beginning of the dissolution of Turner's Mill.

Though Nat never doubts that Turner will keep his promise of freedom, by his twenty-first birthday, no demand exists for the labor of a skilled carpenter. Unable to hire him out in Richmond,

Samuel Turner arranges for Nat to remain with a Baptist minister in Virginia while the Turners relocate to Alabama. According to the terms of the arrangement, the Reverend Alexander Eppes agrees to complete Nat's manumission when the conditions in Richmond improve; in the meantime, he will receive Nat's labor without compensation. Before his departure, Samuel Turner assures Nat that Eppes is "a gentleman of great probity and kindliness," who will treat Nat well and arrange the apprenticeship and emancipation just as Samuel Turner would have (*Confessions*, 226). Samuel asserts his trust in Reverend Eppes and his assessment of the minister as "a gentleman of humanity and honor" (*Confessions*, 227). Samuel Turner could not have been more wrong. After working Nat to the brink of exhaustion and hiring him out to neighbors, Eppes, who does not legally own Nat, sells him, keeps the money, and effectively destroys any hope of Nat obtaining his freedom.

### **The Racialism of Nat Turner**

Between the departure of the Turners and the arrival of Eppes, Nat spends a day and night alone on the abandoned plantation, of which he briefly imagines himself owner. His fantasy is expressed in terms of a change in racial identity that also seems the culmination of the racist attitudes he expresses earlier in the novel. The only person left on the plantation, Nat becomes its "master, not alone of its being at the present instant but of all its past and hence all its memories" (*Confessions*, 232). Only Nat remains to recollect the history of the place and its people. Styron does not elaborate on this intriguing assertion but instead associates Nat's sense of mastery with a fantasy of becoming white. He surveys his surroundings and feels himself the "possessor" of the place. He recalls, "in a twinkling I became white—white as clobber cheese, white, stark white, white as a marble Episcopalian... I was no longer the grinning black boy in velvet pantaloons; for a fleeting moment instead I owned all" (*Confessions*, 232). Temporarily relieved of slaveholding authority, Nat experiences a brief moment of

freedom from class power relations. With no owner, Nat ceases to be a slave. Yet Styron's Turner expresses this fleeting freedom, not in terms of class liberation, but as a transformation of racial identity. As proprietor, Nat imagines that he becomes white; when the fantasy ends, according to the narrator, "my blackness immediately returned...and I was again overtaken by wrenching lowliness and a pang of guilt"—over what is not clear. The passage reiterates racist attitudes Nat expresses early on, when he compares the existence of black people to flies, regards black churchgoers with derision, and sends the injured fieldhand to the back door. Nat's disdain for black people becomes only more apparent as he describes the most dreaded aspect of his carpentry duties at Turner's Mill. "Although I had grown very fond of my apprenticeship as a carpenter and took pride in my growing mastery of the craft," he says, "I despised with a passion that part of my job which required me to work on repairs to the cabins." The narrative creates a striking opposition between Nat's "mastery" of his trade and his presence in the slave quarters, which he loathes precisely because it affirms his social caste. He first explains his aversion in terms of a general uncleanness and offensive odors that he renders in racialized terms. He speaks of "the stink of sweat and grease and piss and nigger offal," as though the stench of refuse has some racially distinguishable quality. He complains of the aroma of "rancid pork" as though he thinks slaves consume it out of preference, not because it is the cheap staple the master rations. In the narrator's estimation, all this amounts to "an abyssal odor of human defeat revolting and irredeemable," which he seems to think reflects a failing of the cabins' occupants. When the carpenter Goat comments, "dese people is not animals even," Nat is not appalled at his boss's dehumanization of other slaves but by the fact that he shares their same racial identity. "At such moments, despite myself," says Turner, "the blood-shame, the disgrace I felt at being a nigger also, was as sharp as a sword through my guts" (*Confessions*, 184). Referring to other enslaved blacks, Styron's Turner makes frequent use of this epithet. When he meets Willis, Nat is initially suspicious of him, a reaction the narrator explains as "a hangover from my lifelong contempt of all black people who dwelt down the



slope” (*Confessions*, 201). In these reflections, Nat does not appear to abhor slavery so much as he detests black people and his own blackness.

### **Styron’s Turner on Sexual Coercion**

Almost immediately after taking Nat into his custody, Eppes begins making sexual advances. Citing Biblical passages that refer to women as “whores” and predators who tempt men into sin, he then quotes what he interprets as a Biblical directive to pursue male sexual partners. The comments eerily amplify Nat’s ruminations following his sexual encounter with Willis. Nat resolves to make “every effort toward purity of mind and body” so that he may devote himself to “theological studies and Christian preaching.” Just before this resolution, however, Nat reflects, “If I could be shaken to my very feet by this unsought-for encounter with a boy, think what it might be...think what an obstacle would be set in my path toward spiritual perfection if I should ever have any commerce with a woman!” (*Confessions*, 207). As a reason for celibacy, Nat’s ruminations are not identical to the arguments Eppes invokes to justify his unwanted advances toward Nat, but it is striking that two of the novel’s three preachers espouse a misogynistic view of women as sexual objects, the embodiment of sin, and impediments to male spiritual enlightenment.

Though Eppes eventually abandons his harassment in favor of trying to work Nat to death, his lascivious talk and attempts to “ambush” Nat offer another account of slavery’s sexual politics. Scholarly works and fictional accounts of women’s experience of slavery—most published after Styron’s *Confessions*, with the notable exception of *Jubilee*—represent sexual exploitation as a common, defining aspect of women’s enslavement. Styron’s novel is unusual in that it explores a scenario where a male slave faces the same threat of sexual assault as female slaves, in this case as Nat’s own mother and grandmother. But here again, the depiction is problematic for the way the

narrator explains the termination of Eppes's advances. Nat says he came to understand that "his desire for me, intense as it was, must have been at war with and was finally exceeded by his desire for my domination." Nat sees the two as mutually exclusive and supposes that "had I submitted to his malodorous gropings, he would have gained a pet but lost a slave; it is not easy totally to master someone you've buggered behind the woodpile" (*Confessions*, 240). The narrator implies that a forcing a slave into a sexual relationship somehow diminishes the authority of the master. Representing sexual coercion as a forfeiture of the master's power, not an extension of it, Styron inverts the power dynamics of sexual assault.

### **"Fury Such as I Had Never Known": The Genesis of Revolt**

In February 1822, despite not being his legal owner, Eppes sells Nat for \$460. Reminding Eppes of his written agreement with Samuel Turner, Nat poses the only challenge to the sale, which Eppes dismisses as casually as the actual contract. Awaiting his fate in the slave pen, the narrator recalls, "I experienced a kind of disbelief which verged close upon madness, then a sense of betrayal, then fury such as I had never known before, then finally, to my dismay hatred so bitter that I grew dizzy and thought I might get sick on the floor" (*Confessions*, 246). His hatred is not for Eppes but for Samuel Turner, who sends no communication following his departure. After building up Nat's hopes with a promise of freedom he fails to fulfill, Samuel Turner consigns Nat's fate to an ill-chosen, unscrupulous proxy and shows no further interest in Nat's wellbeing. The third section opens with an extended meditation on the emotion Nat describes as "an exquisitely sharpened hatred for the white man" (*Confessions*, 257). According to Nat, that particular sentiment by slaves toward their masters results from many factors, but the most important is the necessity of living in "some degree of intimacy with the white man" (*Confessions*, 257). As he begins to develop his plan for revolt, the narrator says

his task is to identify slaves “in whom hatred was already ablaze” and to encourage it in others (*Confessions*, 258).

After his sale to Thomas Moore, Nat begins to experience what he believes is communication from God. Traveling from the slave market, Nat must correct his new owner who cannot read the sign that indicates he has taken the wrong road back to his property and is actually en route to North Carolina. The demonstration of literacy prevents Moore from getting lost but also highlights the educational disparity between Nat and his illiterate master. While Moore and his cousin ruminate on the uselessness of education for slaves, Nat experiences intense hunger pangs. “An emptiness clutched my stomach,” he recalls, “as I realized suddenly how hungry I was, after three days on cornmeal mush. Never had I known such hunger before, never in my life, and I was astonished at the urgency of its pain, the desperation of its clamorous appeal deep within my guts” (*Confessions*, 251). Nat declares his hunger, and Moore responds by administering the first whipping Nat has ever received. The episode, which expresses master-slave power negotiation through literacy and hunger, concludes with another first: Nat hears the voice of God for the first time. In the years leading up to the revolt, hunger apparently continues as the facilitator of divine communication, which eventually induces Nat to plot his rebellion. He develops a custom of retreating into the woods, where he abstains from food for four or five days. During one such fast, Nat receives a vision, also recorded in Gray’s account, of a black and white angel in combat. He interprets the image as a “mandate to destroy all the white people” (*Confessions*, 292).

At the same time, hunger also stands for a race- and class- based suffering that ultimately convinces Nat of his mission’s necessity. He relates the story of Isham, a free black man who normally struggles to support a family of eight but who in a time of “perilous drought...dwelt close to the brink” (*Confessions*, 296). Isham works briefly for Moore, who fires him after only a few hours for lacking the strength and stamina to perform physical labor, the result of “a long-time insufficiency of food”

(*Confessions*, 295). Moore refuses to pay him for the work and “show[s] no charity to Isham at all” (*Confessions*, 297). As Moore drives by Isham’s home, he and Nat see three or four of Isham’s children, “naked, the ribs and bones showing in whitish knobs beneath their skin.” Isham’s wife cradles another child, dying in her arms of starvation. As Moore tries to speed past, Isham stops the mules and screams profane invectives about Moore’s previous conduct and the injustice that a white man has sufficient food while a black child starves. One of the charges leveled against Styron in *Ten Black Writer’s Respond* is that the Isham episode is evidence of an apologist theme, that black people fared better as slaves than they did as free people.<sup>82</sup> Far from being an apology for slavery, Styron illustrates how even African Americans who were not legally enslaved suffered the iniquities of a racialized class structure. For Nat, this incident is another sign of the necessity of murdering the white residents of Southampton. The incident, says Nat, “forced me to realize with an intensity I had never known before that chattel or unchained, slave or free, people whose skins were black would never find true liberty—never, never so long as men like Moore dwelt on God’s earth” (*Confessions*, 298). At the same time, however, Styron suggests Isham’s tirade against Moore is the result of a disturbed mental state that derives from his vulnerable position. The narrator recalls that when he saw Isham approach Moore, Isham’s eyes were “filmed over with aching hunger” and Nat “sensed madness roving through his soul” (*Confessions*, 297). Thus, while Nat’s religious fasts generate visions he perceives as a divine call to action, Styron also equates hunger with social injustice and the psychological state that, according to Nat, results from oppression suffered at the hands of slaveholders.

Critics have also cited the apparent benevolence of Samuel Turner to argue that Styron’s *Confessions* minimizes the brutality of slavery and supports the notion of planter paternalism advanced

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<sup>82</sup> John A. Williams, “Styron’s Faked Confessions,” in Clarke, *William Styron’s Confessions: Ten Black Writer’s Respond*, 48; Thelwell, “Back With the Wind,” 84.

by U.B. Phillips.<sup>83</sup> This argument ignores the fact that Samuel Turner's efforts toward benevolent mastery are ultimately undermined by his failure to fulfill his promise of freedom, his terrible judgment in resigning Nat's fate to Eppes, and his subsequent indifference to Nat's welfare. Nat's all-consuming hatred is not provoked by Eppes but by the betrayal of the paternalist Samuel Turner. Even Joseph Travis, whom Nat describes as "a decent and sympathetic man," had done "the unpardonable" by selling Hark's wife and son (*Confessions*, 342). Nat suggests his own experience as a representative sample of "moral attributes in masters" who "[range] down from the saintly (Samuel Turner) to the all right (Moore) to the barely tolerable (Reverend Eppes) to a few who were unconditionally monstrous" (*Confessions*, 299). As the archetype of such "monsters," Nat relates the abuses of Nathaniel Francis, the aforementioned owner of Will and Sam, who escapes retribution during the revolt. In addition to the physical abuse he concentrates specifically on Will and Sam, Francis is especially cruel to nineteen-year-old Dred, a slave with developmental challenges, whom Francis bought "sight unseen, from a trader with no more scruples than himself" (*Confessions*, 300). According to Nat, Dred's very existence was "living proof of a swindle, and enough to drive his owner to a frenzy" (*Confessions*, 300). More than the potential legal consequences, the social disapprobation of "unprovoked slave murder" deters Francis from killing Dred, but the master exacts revenge for the trader's deception "by tormenting Dred with unspeakable tricks." He once forced Dred to "copulate" with a dog before an audience of poor whites (*Confessions*, 300). In another degrading spectacle, Francis forces Will and Sam to fight each other for the amusement of the community's poor whites. Though neither wants to fight, Francis strikes each man with a whip each time he tries to disengage from the struggle. As Hark describes a scene that conjures both the battle royale of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's harassment by white coworkers in *Black Boy*, Nat feels "an intolerable rage," the likes of which he has not experienced since the day of his sale and that "echoe[s] a memory of Isham's fury as he howled at

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<sup>83</sup> Aptheker, "A Note on the History," 376; Bennett, "Nat's Last White Man," 7.

Moore.” His wrath is, according to the narrator, “the culmination of all the raw buried anguish and frustration” he has harbored since the day he comprehended his status as a slave (*Confessions*, 306).

After that fight, Nat, though ill, begins to preach his first sermon to the remaining black spectators. His subject is the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt and their Exodus to the Promised Land, where, Nat emphasizes, the Jewish people “could stand up an’ live like *men*,” beyond the paltry and inferior rations of slaves, beyond the authority of overseers, in a place where they could earn “an honest dollar” for their labor. He tells his audience that black people will never reap the rewards of the Promised Land until they take pride and learn to love themselves: “Black folk ain’t never goin’ to be no great nation until they studies to love they own black skin an’ the beauty of that skin an’ the beauty of them black hands that toils so hard and black feet that trods so weary on God’s earth” (*Confessions*, 311). This is a remarkable insight from a man who earlier in the novel expresses contempt for black people, is humiliated by his association with other slaves, and fantasizes an escape from his own black skin. Is his sermon a sign that Nat has profoundly altered his racist attitudes? A generous reading might allow that his experience following Samuel Turner’s departure shows Nat how the conditions of slave life he so despised in his youth were imposed on black people by the slave labor system. But Styron offers little evidence that his Nat Turner ever achieves the enlightened sensibility he prescribes to his followers. Nat’s ruminations on the similarity of the lives of black people and flies, which temporally occurs long after this sermon, suggests an abhorrence of the enslaved condition, but also seemingly a disgust for slavery’s victims, as though he blames them for their own oppression.

Interpreting a solar eclipse as the final sign that the time for his mission is at hand, Nat gathers his followers and reveals his plans. He also begins to imagine the white people he meets “in some peculiar attitude of death” (*Confessions*, 351). The narrator describes in chilling detail the tableau of death he envisioned for the white members of his household: “the two boys sent sprawling with heads bashed in, Miss Sarah disemboweled upon the quiet porch, Miss Maria Pope hacked down amid her

chickens, and Travis himself impaled upon a pike” (*Confessions*, 352). Nat intends to strike on the Fourth of July, when the locals traditionally celebrate at a meeting ground outside of town; he plans to seize the weapons in the Jerusalem armory while the residents are gathered for the festivities. When the holiday observance is moved inside the city limits, Nat feels that with the change of venue, “the Lord was playing with me, taunting me, testing me.” Shortly thereafter, Nat falls seriously ill and is nursed by Hark and Sarah Travis. Her attentions during Nat’s illness foster a new sympathy for his mistress, and Nat considers whether he should devise a reason for Sarah and her baby to be absent during the revolt.

Styron’s narrative builds toward an account of Margaret Whitehead’s murder, the single fatality that Nat directly inflicts during the uprising; Styron explains that curious fact, along with the collapse of the rebellion, in terms of Nat’s unexpected aversion to violence and a power struggle within the revolt. During his trial, when Nat recollects a church service where he evaluates potential recruits, he recalls Will crouching behind him and muttering the words “*Ole white cunt*,” as a “sort of demented litany” that he “repeats...over and over” (*Confessions*, 102). Even in this early planning stage, Nat is adamant that “I want no part of him, either now or in my future plans. And I am afraid that he will discover what’s afoot” (*Confessions*, 102). Wary not only of the “foaming and frenzied nature of his madness,” Nat regards Will’s “obsessive incantation” as confirmation of reports that Will “broods constantly upon rape, [and that] the despoliation of white women masters his dreams night and day” (*Confessions*, 102). When he reveals his plan to fellow slaves and initiates his recruitment efforts, Nat deliberately excludes Will, whom Nat considers too volatile. Here again Nat says of Will, “The torture that had been imposed upon him had made him hate not just Francis, hate not just white men but all men, all things, all creation.” Nat says precisely because he, too, “dwelt within the inchoate universe of that hatred” he feared Will as he had “never feared any man, black or white, before” (*Confessions*, 302). In spite of Nat’s precaution, Will jeopardizes the plan with a lone act of rebellion that threatens to

heighten white anxiety toward the slave population. As Nathaniel Francis administers a beating, Will, “finally snap[s], perpetrating what for a Negro [is]the gravest of deeds.” He strikes back with enough force to break the master’s arm and shoulder and runs away. Will’s reprisal is “rare and shocking enough” that it creates “an atmosphere of suspicion” around Southampton’s black population. As the reader already knows, Nat’s subsequent rebellion provokes a hysterical response among local whites. One of several grave miscalculations, Nat anticipates fallout from Will’s actions but fails to foresee the murderous backlash that follows his own revolt. At the same time, Will’s escape seems to resolve the problem of his participation in Nat’s insurrection. Reiterating his earlier concerns, the narrator explains, “I feared his mania, his unfocused hatred and madness, and I passionately wanted him to have nothing to do with my campaign of destruction, sensing that I could in no way control or govern him. I knew that he was obsessed with the idea of raping white women—something I could not abide.” Thus, while Will’s actions could potentially create a new obstacle, his disappearance seems to settle what Nat underestimates as a “minor but nagging problem” (*Confession*, 302). As Nat’s forces gather for a final pre-mission barbecue, Will, who has survived several weeks in the woods, follows the smoke, learns of the uprising from the other slaves, and eagerly volunteers for the assault. Though he reasserts his fear and “instinctive mistrust” of Will, Nat now considers that if he could “channel [Will’s] brutal fury and somehow keep him in check he would make a potent addition to our striking force” (*Confessions*, 378). Nat approves Will’s participation but asserts his own authority, telling Will, “*I* is the boss. *I* runs this show.” He also prohibits the use of liquor and the sexual assault of their victims (*Confessions*, 378). Despite these measures, Nat is unable to control Will, who ultimately contests Nat’s leadership of the rebel forces.

Nat and his fellow insurrectionists, whom he organizes according to the model of the local militia drills, begin their killing at the Travis farm (*Confessions*, 380). Since the sound of gunshots could cause them to be discovered, Nat orders weapons to be limited to hatchets and broadaxes—no



firearms until Nat says otherwise. Before the first assault, Nat is stricken by fear; his conscience tells him to “*Cease the war,*” and “*Run.*” He contemplates fleeing into the woods but is bolstered by the sound of Hark’s laugh in the distance (*Confessions*, 382). Waiting until night, Nat and his co-conspirators find the Travises in their bed. Just before he strikes the first blow, Nat looks directly into the eyes of his master for the first time. While the act marks their altered power relation at the moment the slave is about to slay his master, it also causes Nat to realize, “Whatever else he was, he was a man.” In that instant, Nat begins to grapple with the full significance of taking a human life. He swings the broadax but misses Travis’s skull and buries the blade in the headboard. Travis, still unarmed, springs to his feet, but his exit is blocked by the bed and three other rebel slaves. Nat retrieves the ax and tries again; this time, the blade bounces off Travis’s shoulder, causing Nat to lose his grip on the handle. Nat is “dismayed at [his] irresolution and clumsiness” and the “trembling in every bone.” Will intervenes, “enveloping Travis’s nightshirted figure in a brief embrace.” He decapitates Joseph Travis, then swiftly carries out the murder of Sarah. Nat’s description of the violence is extremely sexualized. Will leaps onto the bed, where “between Miss Sarah’s thrashing, naked thighs he lay in stiff elongate quest like a lover.” Nat compares the act of murder to Will “consummating at last ten thousand old swollen moments of frantic and unappeasable desire.” Earlier, as he described Will’s release of Joseph Travis’s beheaded body, the narrator says he “parted company with this companion he had so intimately clasped” (*Confession*, 390). The language of these passages relates the violence of the revolt to Will’s reported obsession with sexual violence and his intense hatred of humanity—the emotion Nat recognizes because he experienced it in the slave market as the result of the strange intimacy of the master-slave relationship. By again conjuring that intimacy in the murders of Joseph and Sarah Travis, Styron reinforces the idea that the fatal violence results from the very nature of the master-slave relationship. After sensing when Sarah Travis’s spirit leaves her body, Nat flees the room. Observing that “streams of blood past all comprehension lay across the walls,” he begins to question whether this

is in fact God's will. "Ah, my God!" he thinks, "*Hast Thou truly called me to this?*" (*Confessions*, 391).

While Nat recoils from the violence, Will proves all too proficient at slaughtering human beings; for Nat's inability to kill, Will challenges him for leadership of the revolt. As the slave rebels continue their campaign, Nat issues orders to his followers but refrains from actually committing any acts of violence. At one point, the sight of carnage drives Nat to retreat to the woods, where he succumbs to a fit of vomiting. After killing Joseph Travis, Will declares that if Nat cannot kill, Will will do it himself. Will asks whether he or Nat should kill Sarah Travis and, receiving no immediate response, commands Nat to "Git on aside, preacher man!" (*Confessions*, 390). Suggesting Nat as a man of words; Will, a person of action, becomes the "ax man." After the episode at the Travis house, Styron interrupts the narrative with Nat's memory of the conversation in which Gray presses for an expression of remorse. When Nat resumes his account of the revolt, he skips to the end, when the rebels encounter armed resistance and several, including Will, are killed. In what became a point of disagreement between Aptheker, who insisted it would not have happened, and Eugene Genovese, who defended it as a plausible scenario, Styron imagines that other slaves participate in quelling Turner's revolt. Denouncing "those spiritless and spineless wretches who had turned against us," Turner recounts seeing slaves, armed with rifles and muskets, barricading the veranda at Major Ridley's property. Those slaves, says Turner, fired at the rebels "with as much passion and fury and even skill as their white owners and overseers" (*Confessions*, 398). By having Nat narrate the revolt out of sequence and recount the known outcome first, Styron maintains suspense for elements of the narrative Nat does not share with Gray, including the rivalry with Will, whom Nat begins to view as a threat. "It had been as early as that first hour after leaving the Travis house," he says, "that I began to fear that Will might actually seize control from me and disrupt my entire mission" (*Confessions*, 403). Twice more, Nat attempts to inflict death, only to have the blade deflected and leave Will to carry out the murder (*Confessions*, 403-404). Recognizing Will's crucial role, Nat admits that when Will orders him to "step

aside,” Nat’s only option is to obey (*Confessions*, 404). When Will returns with a small party of slaves who had been dispatched on a side mission, his carelessness with a looted mirror leads to a confrontation over who is really in charge of the rebel force. Nat orders Will to drop the mirror, which Nat worries could give away their position and compromise the whole operation. Will, who does not recognize Nat’s authority, tells him, “preacher man, you jes’ better step aside an’ let de ax man run de show. ’Cause, preacher man, less’n you can handle de ax you cain’t handle de army” (*Confessions*, 408). Nelson intercedes in the attempted mutiny and declares that Nat is still in charge, but Will’s public challenge to the legitimacy of Nat’s leadership heightens Nat’s insecurity about his failure to kill. Will again disputes Nat’s leadership at the home of Catherine Whitehead, where Will’s challenge leads Nat to murder Margaret Whitehead. Though Nat carries out the initial assault to prove that he is worthy to retain command, Will’s ability to goad Nat into killing when he has been unwilling or unable to do so suggests that Will already calls the shots.

Will’s provocation of the murder of Margaret Whitehead is the culmination of a narrative pattern in which Styron repeatedly links Will, Nat, and Margaret. At the aforementioned church service, Nat overhears Will muttering obscenities and looks upon the black congregants with hatred, that is, until he catches sight of Margaret. His awareness of her presence transforms Nat’s attitude toward his fellow slaves. He recalls, “my hatred of the Negroes diminishes, dies, replaced by a kind of wild, desperate love for them” (*Confessions*, 104). News of Will beating his master and running away reaches the Whitehead house just as Nat is preparing to drive Margaret to visit a friend. During the trip, Margaret sympathizes with Will’s reaction, acknowledges Francis’s reputation for mistreatment, and expresses her wish that slaves “could live decently and work for themselves and have—oh, real self-regard” (*Confessions*, 365). She relates to Nat how she argued with another schoolmate who opposes emancipation and how she cited Nat as an exemplary black slave who is “almost as intelligent and refined and clean and religious and profoundly understanding of the Bible” as the principal of their

seminary (*Confessions*, 366). Despite the contrast that grows apparent with Nat's reluctance and Will's zest for killing, Styron suggests in the outing with Margaret Whitehead how much Nat and Will have in common. Though he denounces Will's obsession with raping white women, as Margaret talks of her frustration with her fellow student, Nat entertains a fantasy of rape, then prays silently and rejects the thought "as one thrusts away the very body and spirit of Satan" (*Confessions*, 367). To suppress the lust he feels toward Margaret, he contemplates orchestrating a reprieve for Sarah. His thoughts are interrupted by Margaret's request that he stop and aid a turtle that has been crushed but not killed by a passing vehicle, probably hours earlier. Margaret expresses sympathy for the creature's suffering, which Nat ends by bludgeoning the turtle's head with a hickory branch. Dismissive of its pain, Nat twice asserts the animal's lack of importance. "Ain't nothing but a turtle... Twasn't nothin' but an old turtle," he says, and kicks the remains into the ditch (*Confessions*, 370). The scene contrasts Margaret's compassion with Nat's indifference and eerily foreshadows Margaret's death at Nat's hand. As the two have inadvertent physical contact, Nat again fights the impulse to assault her as he hears a voice telling him, "Take her... Spend upon her all afternoon a backed-up lifetime of passion. Without mercy take your pleasure upon her innocent round young body until she is half mad with fright and pain." The voice tells him, "Forget your great mission. Abandon all for these hours of terror and bliss" (*Confessions*, 372). Thus, what Nat claims to fear most in Will is not simply an inability to control his volatile actions but the inability to control in Will the same impulses Nat struggles to suppress within himself. Will embodies and exaggerates the most chilling aspects of Nat's own psyche.<sup>84</sup> In *Neo-Slave Narratives*, Ashraf Rushdy avers that Styron "used troubling, viscous stereotypes from the ideological fabric of American society to produce a hypersexualized Nat Turner whose ideas about violence took

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<sup>84</sup> Mary Kemp Davis similarly refers to Will as Nat Turner's "double" and "shadow self." According to Davis, Will "represents Turner's repressed will and the repressed will of the generic slave. Mary Kemp Davis, *Nat Turner Before the Bar of Judgment: Fictional Treatments of the Southampton Slave Insurrection* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 262.

on sexual forms.” Rushdy, who is also critical of the hypersexualized Lou-Ann Turner, concludes, “Styron’s conflation of violence and sex in his representation of black men and women” adheres to “long-enduring racist discourses used to demean peoples of African descent.”<sup>85</sup>

While Nat entertains thoughts of sexual violence, Margaret’s conversation evokes Biblical teachings on the concept of love. Appealing to Nat’s knowledge of scripture, Margaret prompts him to recite the verse, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: Because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made of perfect love.” Affirming that Nat has indeed recalled the passage to which she alludes, Margaret continues, “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God” (*Confessions*, 368). The passage Margaret elicits from Nat, between his impulses to commit rape and his thought of abandoning his plan for revolt, is from 1John, chapter 4. While Styron’s characters quote selectively, the Biblical chapter as a whole addresses divine justice and describes the test to distinguish between real and false prophets—“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that is coming; and now it is already in the world.”<sup>86</sup> Notably, the call to rebellion, Gray’s Turner reported in the 1831 *Confessions* does not pass the test of true prophecy outlined here, because the spirit that purportedly spoke to Gray’s Turner related Christ’s abandonment of mankind. The fourth chapter of 1John continues, “God’s love was revealed among us this way; God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him...And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.”<sup>87</sup> This follows the verses of the third chapter, which contrasts the act of murder with Christ’s sacrifice of his own life: “Whoever does not love abides in death. All who

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<sup>85</sup> Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives*, 72.

<sup>86</sup> 1John 4:2-3. References are to *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, College Edition, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>87</sup> 1John 4: 9, 14.

hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”<sup>88</sup> With the Biblical allusions in Nat and Margaret’s conversation, Styron implies a theological significance for the contrast between Margaret Whitehead, who espouses love, and Will, the murderer who hates humanity.

Like the Travis murders, the language of Margaret Whitehead’s murder is overtly sexualized. The narrator recalls, “*Ah, how I wanted her,*” in the same breath he relates the phallic symbolism of unsheathing of his sword. After he stabs her twice and turns to leave, Margaret pleads for Nat to end her pain. In much the same manner that Nat ended the suffering of the injured turtle, he bludgeons Margaret with a fence post.

After recounting Margaret’s death, the narrator reveals what he had not told Gray, that he alone allowed the escape of a survivor and ensured the failure of the revolt. Nat saw a fourteen-year-old girl flee into the woods. He could have pursued and killed her but instead chose to let her go. Until then, the rebels had left no one alive to raise the alarm of revolt. The order to use hatchets and broadaxes instead of guns, like the order for Will to drop the mirror, was intended to preserve the secrecy of the revolt. If no one in the community was aware of the violence that was taking place, the slave forces could maintain the tactical advantage of surprising their victims without encountering resistance. By permitting a survivor to alert the other residents, Nat brings about his own defeat and capture.

Before his execution, Styron’s Turner entertains another sexual fantasy of Margaret Whitehead, whom he then imagines as a divine intercessor. Nat hears Margaret Whitehead’s voice saying “*we’ll love one another by the light of heaven above.*” Having previously insisted to Gray that he feels to no remorse, Nat repents of Margaret Whitehead’s murder, then hears another booming divine voice. Nat becomes reconciled to God through Margaret Whitehead and her evocation of New Testament

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<sup>88</sup> 1John 3:14-16.

principles.

### **Nat Turner, a Novel Within a Novel**

William Styron returned to the subject of slavery in his 1979 novel *Sophie's Choice*. The narrative revolves around the relationship between an aspiring writer, a concentration camp survivor, and her lover, who suffers from schizophrenia. Styron based the character Sophie on a neighbor he met during a brief residence in Brooklyn. Born in Virginia, fired from his job with a New York publisher, struggling to write his first novel, Stingo's personal and professional background mirrors Styron's own. The novel Stingo writes is Styron's own first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, which goes by its earlier working title *Inheritance of Night*.<sup>89</sup>

Early in *Sophie's Choice*, Stingo's financial difficulty is alleviated by the discovery of a missing inheritance, acquired from the sale of a slave almost a century earlier. A letter from Stingo's father relates the story he learned by reading family correspondence—a story that also recalls the Cass Mastern episode of *All the King's Men*. Stingo's grandmother was designated by her father as the owner of three slave siblings—Drucilla, Lucinda, and their older brother Artiste. At sixteen, Artiste is accused of making an “improper advance” toward a young white belle, which “caused a tremor of threat and violence to run immediately through the community.” The great-grandfather responds by selling Artiste to a slave trader. The \$800 he receives from the sale is converted into Federal gold coins, which are buried in the yard during the Civil War to conceal them from the Union Army. They are later unearthed and relocated to a cubbyhole in the cellar, until Stingo's father learns their location by reading his grandfather's letters. The coins have appreciated in value 700 percent, so that by the time

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<sup>89</sup> William Styron, preface to *Inheritance of Night: Early Drafts of Lie Down in Darkness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), vii-x.

the proceeds are divided among the heirs, Stingo's share is about \$500, enough to sustain him while he writes his novel. As Stingo's father also relates, the charge that prompted the sale of Artiste was later revealed to be a lie. The white woman who accused Artiste, was a "hysteric" who later accused another black youth "of the same offense, only to have her story proved to be a falsehood." She confessed that she had also fabricated her accusation against Artiste. Here, instead of reinforcing the stereotype of the hypersexualized slave as he does in *The Confessions*, Styron casts that falsehood as central to his slaveholders' moral culpability for slavery. As Stingo's father writes, "You may imagine your great-grandfather's anguish. In this letter to my mother he describes the ordeal of his guilt. Not only had he committed one of the truly unpardonable acts of a slaveowner—broken up a family—but had sold off an innocent boy of 16 into the grinding hell of the Georgia turpentine forests." The great-grandfather's effort to find Artiste and buy him back came to the same futile end as Cass Mastern's attempt to locate Phebe: "Artiste was never found" (*Sophie's Choice*, 33). In *All the King's Men*, the Cass Mastern story represents Jack Burden's need to achieve acceptance of the past. As Styron signifies Warren's novel in his own, he casts Stingo—a largely autobiographical character—in the Jack Burden role of a writer grappling with a family legacy of guilt over slavery. With a writing career financed by the sale of the falsely accused Artiste, the narrating Stingo, considerably older than his narrated counterpart, concludes with an observation that seems to double as a commentary on *Nat Turner*. Stingo says he considered that if he had donated his share of the money from Artiste's sale to the N.A.A.C.P., he might have expiated his guilt, but in the end he was glad he kept the money. "For these many years afterward," he says, "as accusations from black people became more cranky and insistent that as a writer—a lying writer at that—I had turned to my own profit and advantage the miseries of slavery, I succumbed to a kind of masochistic resignation, and thinking of Artiste, said to myself: What the hell, once a racist exploiter always a racist exploiter."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (1979; New York: Vintage International, 1992), 34.



Not only is Stingo's early writing career financially supported by Artiste's sale, Styron links Artiste's story to what is clearly Stingo's counterpart to *The Confession of Nat Turner*. When Stingo dreams of his "ghostly benefactor, Artiste" that dream becomes "fused with the dream of another slave," Nat Turner, who led a slave revolt near Stingo's Virginia home.<sup>91</sup> After the remainder of his money is stolen from his medicine cabinet, Stingo's anger gives way to a sense of relief: "My survival would no more be assured through funds tainted with guilt across the span of a century. I was glad in way to get shut of such blood money, to get rid of slavery." He then realizes, "in the fever of my mind and in the most unquiet regions of my heart I would be shackled by slavery as long as I remained a writer."<sup>92</sup> Stingo begins a "mental ramble" that starts with Artiste and leads to the idea to write a novel based on Turner's revolt. Professing a longtime interest in the uprising and recalling the few available sources on the revolt, Stingo realizes the character of Nat Turner will be his to invent.<sup>93</sup>

By lending his own career to Stingo, Styron invites readers to interpret the narrator's comments as rebuttal to the criticism of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*; however, by representing the false accusations against Artiste and Stingo's guilt about his inheritance, Styron also seems to attempt a corrective of his earlier use of sexual stereotypes in *The Confessions*. In the 1980s, novels such as *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* would revisit other significant aspects of Styron's *Confessions*, including the slave revolt, Tig's attempt at infanticide, the power dynamics of sexual abuse, and the psychological trauma of enslavement.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 460.

## Chapter 6

### Slavery and Apostasy at Gettysburg: Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*

After a four-year-long centennial in which Civil War books inundated the literary marketplace, publishers assumed the subject had been exhausted, at least for the time. The war in Vietnam also helped stigmatize military studies so that the combination, Gary Gallagher explains, “severely curtailed” publications and led to a “dormant stage” in Civil War memory that lasted well into the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The Civil War became fallow ground, untended in popular culture but for one notable exception. In 1974, after rejections from fifteen other publishers, a small financially strapped firm issued Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, which would become one of the most influential Civil War narratives of the late twentieth century.

After a visit to the Gettysburg battlefield, Shaara, who began his career as a writer of science fiction, resolved to novelize the battle of Gettysburg from the perspectives of the men who fought there. It would be a work of fiction but one made authentic through the words and recollections of the actual Gettysburg survivors. Shaara drew from soldiers' letters and battle reminiscences. He also began to contemplate—in a manner sometimes problematic—slavery as the cause of the war. Historically, the genre of combat narratives had promoted sectional reunion and ignored slavery. Shaara offered a new take on an old story. Rejecting heroic notions of death and combat, he authored a narrative that acknowledges slavery as the point of dispute and foregrounds war's dehumanizing effect on combatants. Research and writing took eight years. In 1975, Shaara won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The nominal sales of the novel even after the award, like Shaara's difficulty finding a publisher, suggests a lack of popular interest, but the David McKay Co., which ultimately contracted the book, did not help the novel's fortunes. At the time, the publisher verged on bankruptcy and invested little

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<sup>1</sup> Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood & Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 4.

capital for distribution.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly twenty years later, former *American Heritage* editor Richard F. Snow recalled the day a review copy of *Angels* made its way to his desk. “I opened it idly,” Snow wrote, “full of complacent scorn that somebody should still think it worthwhile setting a story in the endlessly plundered vineyards of the Civil War. Ten minutes later I was transfixed.” Snow’s account introduced the October 1992 special issue of *American Heritage*, which printed the results of an informal survey asking novelists, journalists, and historians to name their favorite historical novel.<sup>3</sup> Of 106 replies, *The Killer Angels* received five citations, three less than *Red Badge of Courage*, which topped the list.<sup>4</sup> For Snow, and presumably other readers like him, *The Killer Angels* provided an antidote to what in 1974 had become a general weariness for the Civil War. Without the novel, interest in war and its contention with the memory of slavery might have remained dormant in the popular imagination. Instead, Shaara’s novel directly inspired major films like Ken Burns’s *The Civil War*, Ron Maxwell’s adaptation *Gettysburg* and two novels by Shaara’s son, Jeff. For better or worse, *The Killer Angels* helped revive interest in the war and spurred other works that, in the 1990s and often via revision, shaped popular understandings of the conflict.

Evidence of *The Killer Angels*’ cultural valence in schools and universities is more anecdotal than quantitative, though a 2008 curriculum study found 65 percent of history professors who cover some aspect of Gettysburg make *The Killer Angels* required reading.<sup>5</sup> In the *American Heritage*

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<sup>2</sup> John Barron, “Embers of Civil War; Jeff Shaara Fans Flames of Passion in ‘Gods and Generals,’” *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 21, 1996, LexisNexis Academic; Ken Ringle, “A Tale of Blood; Jeff Shaara’s Civil War Novel Ends Where His Father’s Acclaimed Book Began,” *The Washington Post* July 10, 1996, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>3</sup> Richard F. Snow, “The Truth of Fiction,” *American Heritage Magazine*, October 1992, <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/truth-fiction>.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Pyle, “*Red Badge of Courage* Tops Magazine Survey on Historical Novels,” *The Associated Press*, September 28, 1992, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>5</sup> The study examined two hundred syllabi for advanced undergraduate courses taught in the academic years 2000-2001 through 2005-2006. William B. Rogers and Terese Martyn; “A Consensus at Last: American Civil War Texts and the

survey, James McPherson cited *The Killer Angels* as his favorite historical novel and added that many undergraduates shared his preference. In his course on the Civil War and Reconstruction, McPherson found *The Killer Angels* “perennially the students’ favorite reading.”<sup>6</sup> More recently, Carol Reardon admitted a “special fondness” for *The Killer Angels* and said she assigns it in courses on the Civil War and military history. Reardon’s encounter with a woman at Gettysburg National Park suggests the novel’s influence over the popular imagination. The woman was searching the list of Union casualties for Buster Kilrain, a character born solely of Shaara’s imagination.<sup>7</sup> A 2005 feature in *Fortune* magazine also suggests the novel’s broader appeal. *Fortune* staff compiled a list of the seventy-five best books in business literature, which aren’t really “business books” but address themes like “leadership,” “office politics,” and “power.” They recommended *The Killer Angels* as a good reference for “decision-making.”<sup>8</sup>

With more than three million copies in print to date, historians and literary critics repeatedly site the book as one of the best and most read Civil War novels of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Early reviews were not as laudatory. *New York Times* critic Thomas LeClair wrote that Shaara’s “achievement is combining... passages of apocalyptic immediacy with smaller scenes that dramatize the historians cultural understandings. But LeClair also found fault with the “‘You are There’ portentousness” and

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Topics that Dominate the College Classroom,” *History Teacher* 41, no. 4 (August 2008): 519-530, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40543889>.

<sup>6</sup> “My Favorite Historical Novel,” *American Heritage* 43, no. 6 (October 1992), <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/my-favorite-historical-novel>.

<sup>7</sup> “An Interview with Carol Reardon on Civil War History, Literature, and Popular Memory,” *The Ambrose Pierce Project Journal* 3, no.1 (Fall 2007), <http://www.ambrosepierce.org/journal3reardon.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Jim Aley et.al, “The Smartest Books We Know,” *Fortune*, March 21, 2005, 148-162.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Gallagher calls *The Killer Angels* “by far the most widely read of Civil War novels published in the last quarter century.” Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 219. Sales figures are based on “The Killer Angels,” catalog entry, Random House <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?ppr1/9780345444127.html>.

the tendency to linger “too long on personality for its own sake.”<sup>10</sup> A second review in May 1975, after Shaara received the Pulitzer Prize, attributed the award more to Shaara’s choice of a compelling subject than to his literary achievement. According to Thomas Lask, “Gettysburg is such a dramatic story that no one who comes near covering it within the compass of a book can fail.” Lask found nothing in the novel to justify Shaara’s use of a seemingly experimental rather than a “straightforward narrative.”<sup>11</sup>

Though *The Killer Angels* seems to have built an earlier following, particularly among historians, only in the 1990s did the novel, as Richard F. Snow says, “[cross] the boundary from underground enthusiasm to American classic.”<sup>12</sup> Much of the renewed interest in *The Killer Angels* can be traced to Ken Burns’s *The Civil War* and to the release of the novel’s film adaptation, *Gettysburg*. Viewers may recognize Shaara’s hand in Burns’s interpretation of the battle of Gettysburg. By Burns’s account, he finished reading *The Killer Angels* on Christmas Day 1984, closed what he calls “the book that changed my life” and announced to his father that the Civil War was going to be the subject of his next documentary. His father asked which part, and Burns replied, “All of it.”<sup>13</sup> In 1990, Burns’s film became the highest rated broadcast in PBS history. Then in 1993 with the popularity of Ron Maxwell’s *Gettysburg* and nineteen years after the novel’s publication, *The Killer Angels* rose for the first time to

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas LeClair, “Three Fictions,” *New York Times*, Oct 20, 1974, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Lask, “Books of the Times: High Tide of the Confederacy,” *New York Times (1857-Current File)* May 10, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>12</sup> Richard F. Snow, “Aural History,” *American Heritage*, September 1997, <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/aural-history>. The observation on the book’s popularity with historians is based again on the *American Heritage* historical novel survey, which appeared in 1992, after multiple broadcasts of Burns’s documentary and before the release of Maxwell’s film. The article constitutes one of the first published evaluations of the novel since its initial publication reviews. The other respondents who cited *The Killer Angels* in that survey were Timothy Foote of *Smithsonian* magazine, Abraham Lincoln biographer Stephen B. Oates, who declared “*The Killer Angels* is the best Civil War novel ever written, even better than *The Red Badge of Courage*, which inspired it,” and Christopher Buckley who revealed “*The Killer Angels* is the only book that’s ever made me cry—apart from ‘Filing Your 1040’ by the IRS”; “My Favorite Historical Novel,” *American Heritage*.

<sup>13</sup> “My Favorite Historical Novel”; Ken Burns, “Why I Decided to Make the Civil War” PBS.Org, accessed March 9, 2014 <https://www.pbs.org/civilwar/film/>.

the status of bestseller.<sup>14</sup>

Given the belated success of the novel—long after the author’s death—and the popularity of the film adaptation, Shaara’s son Jeff began to compose the first of two companion books that would frame the senior Shaara’s work as the centerpiece of a trilogy. *Gods and Generals* was released in 1996, followed two years later by *The Last Full Measure*. Both became bestsellers. Nearly every critic who reviewed them recounted the back story of *The Killer Angels*’ long rise to popularity and attempted to gauge whether the younger Shaara, could “measure up” to his father’s authorial ability. Most concluded that the later novels did not equal *The Killer Angels* in technical skill or artistry. As the benchmark for its successors, *The Killer Angels* earned more public praise than it did as a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize. One critic declared *The Killer Angels* “the finest novel ever written about the civil war,” while another wrote that *The Killer Angels* is “justifiably and widely acclaimed as perhaps the finest Civil War novel yet produced.”<sup>15</sup> Another reviewer noted that the 1974 novel is “often ranked with *The Red Badge of Courage* as among the finest Civil War novels ever written.”<sup>16</sup> A feature writer who interviewed Jeff Shaara characterized *The Killer Angels* as “perhaps the most beloved and influential Civil War novel since *Gone With the Wind*.”<sup>17</sup>

Michael Shaara’s interest in the Civil War battle sprang from the letters of his great-grandfather, a Confederate soldier wounded at Gettysburg. As the author told it, he first visited the Gettysburg battlefield in August 1964 while driving from New Jersey, where he was born, to Florida, where he

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<sup>14</sup> Lois Blinkhorn, “Civil War Novelist Acknowledges Debt To Famous Father,” *Milwaukee (WI) Journal Sentinel*, July 21, 1998, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Banks, “Summertime Reading; Jeff Shaara’s Civil War Saga Doesn’t Measure Up,” *Pittsburgh (PA) Post-Gazette*, June 28, 1998, LexisNexis Academic; Tom Steadman, “Last Book is the Worst In Civil War Trilogy,” *News & Record* (Greensboro, NC), March 21, 1999, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>16</sup> Joe Dirck, “Civil War Heroes Out of Author’s Range; Neither Shaara’s Grant nor Lee Ring True,” *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio) July 12, 1998, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>17</sup> Ringle, “A Tale of Blood; Jeff Shaara’s Civil War Novel Ends Where His Father’s Acclaimed Book Began.”

lived at the time. He recalled sitting for two hours with his back against a tree by the stone wall that had been the focus of Pickett's doomed charge. He claimed, "every now and then when I closed my eyes, I could see it."<sup>18</sup>

Given the similarity of the accounts, one wonders if Shaara's exercise might have inspired the mediation he penned for Union cavalry general John Buford. As Buford ponders the forthcoming battle, he entertains a "brutally clear" vision of the likely outcome. Shaara's Buford can "actually see the blue troops for one long bloody moment, going up the long slope to the stony top as if it were already done and a memory already, an odd, set, stony quality to it, as if tomorrow had occurred and there was nothing you could do about it, the way you sometimes feel before a foolish attack, knowing it will fail but you cannot stop it or even run away but must even take part and help it fail."<sup>19</sup> With the run-on syntax, the temporal shifts, and the meditation on memory, Shaara's scene evokes another famous commentary on the memory of Pickett's charge by William Faulkner, whose work Shaara admired:

For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself and his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably hand his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances...yet it's going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think *This Time. Maybe this time....*<sup>20</sup>

Faulkner's passage from *Intruder in the Dust* highlights Lost Cause denial and the process of reliving the moment just before the disaster, when "it hasn't happened yet." The concern with complicity and

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Kernan, "The Ordeal of Michael Shaara: Author's Odyssey from Civil War to Sci-Fi," *The Washington Post* September 29, 1982, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>19</sup> Michal Shaara, *The Killer Angels: A Novel of the Civil War* (1974; repr., New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), vii. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Killer Angels*.

<sup>20</sup> William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (1948; repr., New York: Vintage International, 1991), 190.

aftermath in Buford's meditation indicates Michael Shaara's departure from earlier Civil War narratives.

Then again, Jeff Shaara traces his father's the initial visit to a 1966 family vacation. By the time Michael Shaara talked of sitting under the trees and imagining the battle unfold, he had divorced his wife and was estranged from his family. In the same interview, Michael Shaara spoke of his son's death. Jeff, who would go on to manage his father's estate, was alive and well in Tampa. Michael Shaara had suffered a near-fatal motor scooter crash in Italy, where he was teaching Shakespeare through a program for Florida State University. He was in a coma for five months and suffered permanent neurological damage that made writing difficult. Shaara claimed his family hadn't supported him through his ordeal. Jeff Shaara later attributed the rift to his moving out of the house. His father, he said, had a "patriarchal view of life" and thought his children should live at home even after marriage.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, former colleague Pat H. Smith remembered Michael Shaara as "charismatic," "charming," and "loved by his students."<sup>22</sup> After his accident, Michael Shaara suffered depression and expressed a sense of alienation. He told a reporter—the same to whom he claimed his son had died—that he had never felt he belonged in the places he had lived or, professionally, among either editors or English professors.<sup>23</sup> He died at age fifty-eight of a heart attack that might have been prevented with a surgery he refused to undergo.<sup>24</sup> His 1988 *New York Times* obituary reported that after *The Killer Angels*, his work was "only politely received."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Lois Blinkhorn, "Civil War Novelist Acknowledges Debt to Famous Father," *Milwaukee (WI) Journal Sentinel*, July 21, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Pat H. Smith, email message to the author, October 9, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Kernan, "The Ordeal of Michael Shaara."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> "Michael J. Shaara, 58; Pulitzer Prize Winner," *The New York Times*, May 9, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/05/09/obituaries/michael-j-shaara-58-pulitzer-prize-winner.html>.



The scooter accident, from which doctors did not expect Shaara to recover, was not his first confrontation with death. Shaara, who had just finished his first novel, was teaching a full undergraduate course load and lecturing for public television. Ignoring early warning signs, he continued chain smoking and drinking twenty cups of coffee a day, when he suffered his first heart attack at age thirty-six. That experience, of being clinically dead and revived, was the subject of “In the Midst of Life,” an autobiographical account that appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1966.

Though research and writing of *The Killer Angels* took eight years, including what Shaara called, “thinking time,” what he wrote of his near-death experience in “In the Midst of Life” raises themes that are clearly discernible in the novel.<sup>26</sup> From the general’s letters, Shaara suspected that Lee had suffered a heart attack and wrote scenes in which the untreated condition plagued the general at Gettysburg. More importantly, Shaara endowed Lee with the same self-destructive drive that the author recognized in himself and employed it to reverse a familiar and timeworn narrative. In the magazine piece, Shaara wrote of his survival that he felt “a certain sense of divine intervention.”<sup>27</sup> To different effect, faith would also become a preeminent concern for the characters of *The Killer Angels*.

### ***The Killer Angels* as Reinterpretation**

*The Killer Angels* undermines two major tenets of late nineteenth century Civil War memory: “the soldier’s faith” and the apotheosis of Robert E. Lee. Shaara also places slavery at the ideological center of the narrative, only to undermine a “war of ideals” in a scathing critique that highlights the hypocrisy of a U.S. rebellion against the principles of its founding. Representing the battle of

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<sup>26</sup> Kernan, “The Ordeal of Michael Shaara.”

<sup>27</sup> Michael Shaara, “In the Midst of Life,” *Saturday Evening Post*, August 27, 1966, p.83, EBSCO MasterFILE Premier (17050043).

Gettysburg from the perspectives of high-ranking officers, Shaara's *Killer Angels* seemingly adheres to a model of Civil War narratives established by Gilded Age magazine series like *Century's* "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War." These memoirs, authored by famed commanders—usually generals—became a staple of a wider culture of sectional reconciliation. By the 1880s Joan Waugh explains, "the idea that slavery caused the war and that the Union army became a revolutionary instrument in bringing freedom to millions of slaves became an embarrassment to the South and therefore an impediment to reconciliation."<sup>28</sup> Reminiscences published in this period diverted the story of the war from slavery and emancipation to an account that represented both sides as having "fought for noble causes" and as being "equally honorable."<sup>29</sup> Introducing the "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War" series, *Century* editors trumpeted a new era in which "heroic events" were then "passing into our common history where motives will be weighed without malice, and valor praised without distinction of uniform."<sup>30</sup> While the editors tapped an interest in the literary market—the magazine's circulation surged by nearly one hundred thousand copies per month in the first six months of the series—they peddled a memory of the war that was decidedly white, masculine, and dictated by high-ranking officers, rarely by the rank-and-file.<sup>31</sup>

Like the first-person accounts that undoubtedly informed his research, Shaara writes *The Killer Angels* from the viewpoints of officers but shifts perspectives and allows for a multiplicity of

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<sup>28</sup> Joan Waugh, "Ulysses S. Grant, Historian," in *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, eds. Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 22.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> "Topics of the Time: Battles and Leaders of the Civil War," *Century: A Popular Quarterly*, October 1884, 943–944, <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=cent;cc=cent;rgn=full%20text;idno=cent0028-6;didno=cent0028-6;view=image;seq=0953;node=cent0028-6%3A19>.

<sup>31</sup> After the first three years, "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War" was reissued in a four-volume bound set. Circulation figures are from "Preface," in Robert Underwood Johnson, Clarence Clough Buel, and Century Company, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. 1 (1887; repr., New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), x. For a thorough discussion on gender in the literary marketplace see Alice Fahs, "Remembering the Civil War in Children's Literature of the 1880s and 1890s," in Fahs and Waugh, *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*. A notable exception to the officer's memoir is Samuel R. Watkins's *Company Aytch*.

conflicting character insights.<sup>32</sup> Shaara signals his departure from the reunion-through-heroism narrative with a modest disclaimer to his reader. Though he based the novel on considerable research and accounts from the historical actors, he “thought it necessary to update some of the words so that the religiosity and naiveté of the time, which were genuine, would not seem too quaint to the modern ear.”<sup>33</sup> In reality, Shaara updates much more than language. While he contemplates faith of multiple varieties, the battle at Gettysburg functions largely as a reverse conversion experience that transforms even the most ardent of believers into unabashed cynics. That loss of faith, which is never redeemed in the novel, challenges not only century-old interpretations of the Civil War but also the basic tenets of much older narratives about American national identity.

### **The Soldier’s Faith**

In his 1895 Memorial Day address to the graduating class at Harvard, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., exalted the faith that compels a soldier to “throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has little notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.”<sup>34</sup> The occasion for the remarks had originated thirty years earlier in efforts to memorialize the Civil War dead. From the beginning, these commemorations reflected sectional and racial divisions, which persisted well after Holmes oration, but his speech, “The Soldier’s Faith,” epitomized Civil War remembrance in a culture that prized sectional reconciliation. In

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<sup>32</sup> Shaara employs indirect discourse to narrate each chapter from the perspective of a single officer. He alternates main characters with each chapter. Though Privates Bucklin and Kilrain offer some of the most important critiques in the novel, these occur through dialogue. The narrator never accesses the consciousness of these characters or of the man, presumed to be a fugitive slave, who encounters members of Chamberlain’s regiment.

<sup>33</sup> Shaara, foreword to *The Killer Angels*, vii.

<sup>34</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., “The Soldier’s Faith,” in *The Essential Holmes: Selections from Letters, Speeches, Judicial Opinions, and Other Writings*, ed. Richard A. Posner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 89.

the 1880s, attempts to extinguish sectional antipathies also expunged the war's political and ideological contexts from many public observances. The war's meaning was increasingly sought in reminiscences of battle, usually authored by officers. This popular genre cast the war as a white, masculine narrative that celebrated the heroic and disregarded political motives.<sup>35</sup>

Holmes frames "The Soldier's Faith" as a call to action for a younger generation to resist the decadence and commercialism of the Gilded Age. For Holmes, however, the Civil War had effected profound disillusionment. Though he reconsidered the moral convictions that had led him to fight, he maintained an admiration for "military professionalism," which "The Soldier's Faith" reflects.<sup>36</sup> Holmes spoke of his experience in combat and declared soldiers' "greatest moments" those when "faith" trounces "common sense," when they overcome the primal instinct for survival and tap some innate ability that makes man "capable of miracle" and "face annihilation for a blind belief." Before he closed, Holmes enumerated the lessons his generation had learned by example from "noble enemies" and which he apparently meant as a prescriptive model for his younger audience. The lessons included, "keep the soldier's faith against the doubts of civil life," "remember that duty is not to be proved in the evil day, but ....obeyed unquestioning," and "love glory more than wallowing ease."<sup>37</sup> Amid a culture of reunion, Holmes avoided divisive sectional terms and named only the various theaters of encounter with an enemy whose conduct he commended as "noble" and commanded his audience to emulate.

By 1895, the most pervasive stories white Americans told themselves about their recent national past deprived the Civil War of historical causation and searched for meaning in the immolation of soldiers, which Drew Faust writes, had come to represent "the highest ideal" of a faith that relied on the agency of man, not God. The most venerable figure of Holmes oration is the soldier who throws his life

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<sup>35</sup> Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 178-179, 181, 189, 191-192.

<sup>36</sup> Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 1st pbk. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 53, 59.

<sup>37</sup> Holmes and Posner, "The Soldier's Faith," *The Essential Holmes: Selections from Letters, Speeches, Judicial Opinions, and Other Writings*, 89-90, 92.

away literally for nothing, apropos of an epoch in which people, according to Faust, embraced an “elegiac view of the war that hailed death as an end in itself” and found “purpose” in the “very purposelessness of [the soldier’s] sacrifice.”<sup>38</sup> Writing nearly eighty years later, Michael Shaara engages in *The Killer Angels* what he too marks as central facets of soldierly life—duty, faith, and death. But where Holmes ennobled these themes, Shaara problematizes them. He wages full assault on the principles of “The Soldier’s Faith” and accomplishes a major revision in the relation between battle narratives and the memory of slavery.

In Shaara’s first chapter, Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain receives troops transferred from the old Second Maine regiment. One hundred twenty men had volunteered for three years, all thinking they had committed to fight with the Second only. When all of the two-year enlistments expired, the regiment disbanded, but the remaining men, weary and disgusted, refused to be reassigned to another regiment. They were designated “mutineers” and sent to the army’s only other Maine regiment with orders signed by newly-promoted general Meade that “they are to fight” and if they do not, Chamberlain “can feel free to shoot them” (*Killer Angels*, 18). When the troops arrive, their elected spokesman Joseph Bucklin rails against the war and its officers:

I’m tired, Colonel. I’ve had all of this army and all of these officers, this damned Hooker and this goddamned idiot Meade, all of them, the whole bloody lousy rotten mess of sick-brained potbellied scabheads that aint fit to lead a johnny detail, aint fit to pour pee outen a boot with instructions on the heel. I’m tired. We are good men and we had our own good flag and these goddamned idiots use us like we was cows or dogs or even worse. We aint gonna win this war. We can’t win no how because of these lame-brained bastards from West Point, these goddamned gentlemen, these *officers* (*Killer Angels*, 24).

Bucklin highlights what has become, for him and his fellow objectors, a veritable conscription to a hierarchical institution. Their officers, made superior through no apparent aptitude for command, show little more regard for the soldiers’ welfare than if the men were not men but livestock “or even worse.”

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<sup>38</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering : Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 270.

Later, reading a newspaper call for militia, cavalry general John Buford thinks that militia will not stop Lee's invasion but recalls with evident sarcasm that the Federals have "good old George Meade." Buford chides, "Now. Now. Have faith. He might be very good," then concludes, "The hell he is" (*Killer Angels*, 43). As with Bucklin, a familiarity with incompetent superiors has conditioned Buford's cynicism. His own experience tells him that Meade, too new to command, will hesitate. He will commit fatal errors, and in the end, the Union army will "attack valiantly and be butchered valiantly." Disgusted by such celebrations of futility, Buford predicts that afterward, "men will thump their chests and say what a brave charge it was" (*Killer Angels*, 37). What bothers him most, he concludes, is witnessing "the appalling sick stupidity that was so bad you thought sometimes you would go suddenly, violently, completely insane just having to watch it." And yet, this is a dangerous prelude to the job of repulsing Lee's army. Despite his bleak view, even Buford, a man "very low on faith" acknowledges faith as the very attribute on which the battle will turn (*Killer Angels*, 44).

As disgruntled soldiers search their depleted reserves, the Chamberlain brothers suggest a correlation between religion and military service. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and his staff aide, who is also his younger brother Tom, have trouble reconciling their sibling relationship with military protocol. Corrected for calling his brother "sir," Tom blurts out, "Well, Lawrence, Great God A-Mighty" (*Killer Angels*, 25). He is interrupted with a second reprimand to "just be careful about that name business in front of the men" (*Killer Angels*, 25). In his vexation, Tom, by profane address, transforms his superior officer into "Great God A-Mighty." The elder Chamberlain espouses the same notion when he tells Tom that unlike Meade, who has his son for an adjutant, they must guard against the appearance of favoritism. Generals, Lawrence explains, can do whatever they like without concern of censure. Characterizing the army's command structure as secular religious order, he suggests omnipotence for men who "have your future in their hands" and who "have all power and know all." According to Chamberlain, "[There is] nothing quite so much like God on earth as a general on a

battlefield” (*Killer Angels*, 26).

While the Chamberlains figuratively equate the power of generalship with divine authority, a psychological transference casts Lee as a substitute for the God in whom James Longstreet has recently abandoned faith. Longstreet’s advanced theories of defensive warfare place him, as a military strategist, far ahead of his contemporaries. As Shaara explains, Longstreet “smelled disaster like distant rain,” but fatally, he lacked “the power to convince” (*Killer Angels*, 123). The text casts Longstreet as a brilliant, careful, but ultimately tragic figure who, in contrast with Chamberlain’s idealism and apparent aptitude for persuasion, resembles Cassandra of Greek legend: A figure cursed with foresight of impending doom, who lacks the ability to make his prophecies believed (*Killer Angels*, 123). A modern figure not only in his theories of warfare but in his already intense despair before Gettysburg, Longstreet, unknown to his fellow soldiers, is a man driven “out of his mind, insane” by grief over the deaths of his children—three of them within a week’s time from the fever that struck Richmond. Longstreet “had not thought God would do a thing like that,” but when he went to the church to pray for the lives of his children, “He got down on his knees and pleaded but there was no answer” (*Killer Angels*, 123). At the outset of the novel, the children’s deaths have already made an atheist of Longstreet. The memory of that loss—of three dead children but also, perhaps, the demise of faith—brings tears to Longstreet eyes, but he resolves to turn away from the grief and endure in knowledge that he still has the army. As if to support Chamberlain’s analogy of gods and generals, Longstreet also reflects, “He even had the father, in place of God: old Robert Lee” (*Killer Angels*, 26, 123).

The deification of Lee by his second-in-command anticipates what, historically, became the apotheosis of Lee in the Lost Cause remembrance of the war. According to David Blight, as Confederate “diehards” shaped narratives of the war from the late 1860s to the late 1880s, “They made Robert E. Lee into the God-like embodiment of a leader whose cause could be defeated only by

overpowering odds.”<sup>39</sup> In *The Killer Angels*, the devotion he elicits from Confederate soldiers and his unwavering faith in God strike a glaring contrast with the skepticism of figures like Bucklin and Buford. By the end of the novel, however, Lee proves himself the incarnation of everything the disaffected Federals detest in their commanders.

Shaara’s Lee subscribes, if not to his own godly authority, then at least to the belief that he receives periodic glimpses of God’s will. Though Longstreet implores Lee to abandon the Gettysburg assault and adopt a defensive strategy, Lee’s reason for ignoring the appeals is revealed at the end of a prayer before the final day’s fighting. With new certainty of God’s will, the general concludes, “This was the way, as God would have it. Face to face with the enemy, on grounds of his own choosing. End with honor” (*Killer Angels*, 263). The hubris of Lee’s claim to know the will of God recalls the delusions of William Styron’s Nat Turner, who believes—incorrectly, he later discovers—that God has selected him to lead a deadly revolt against slaveholders. As in the case of Styron’s Turner, Lee’s error is apparent only after his assault has failed.

Escalating tension between Lee and Longstreet hinges on their incompatible doctrines of warfare and conflicting notions of honor. The significance of that virtue within Confederate ranks can be read in the cautionary tale of Richard Garnett. For withdrawing his troops from “an impossible position” without orders, Stonewall Jackson accused Garnett of cowardice and demanded a court martial that never convened, but Jackson died before Garnett had an opportunity to redeem himself. The whole affair leaves Garnett a “tortured man” who would “have to die bravely to erase the stain” (*Killer Angels*, 247, xii, 129). Though a leg injury leaves him unable to walk, the brooding Garnett refuses to miss the last day’s charge. On horseback, a perfect target as he towers above the other men, Garnett rides to his death.

For Lee, who subscribes to the same logic, concern for his own reputation cultivates his distaste

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<sup>39</sup> Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 258.



for defensive warfare. When charged with safeguarding Richmond, his troops' entrenchment around the city earned him the nickname "King of Spades." As one subordinate recalls, "you could see how hurt he was...Stain on the old honor" (*Killer Angels*, 62). The recollection of that insult suggests the commanding general subscribes to the same values as Jackson and his Stonewall Brigade, an ideology in which "there is nothing more important than honor" (*Killer Angels*, xii). When Lee contemplates his final, fatal attack, he justifies the certain deaths of his men with the assurance that they "came here ready to die for what they believed in, for their homes and their honor, and although it was often a terrible death it was always an honorable death" (*Killer Angels*, 262). With its adulation of heroic death, Lee's command creed echoes the philosophy Holmes espoused in his Memorial Day address.

By contrast, Longstreet insists, "honor without intelligence is a disaster" and "honor could lose the war." Rejecting notions of the venerable death, the defensive strategist maintains that "the point of the war is not to show how brave you are and how you can die in a manly fashion, face to the enemy. God knows it's easy to die. Anybody can die" (*Killer Angels*, 129). Then to the English observer Arthur Freemantle, Longstreet explains the honor obsession as an antediluvian value, a holdover from when long range weapons were bows and arrows and men ran at each other with swords. What others have failed to realize is that the old tactics don't work against modern weapons. Though Longstreet accurately predicts the outcome of the Confederate offensive, other officers, including Lee, find these arguments "vaguely shameful" (*Killer Angels*, 130).

The conflict between Lee and Longstreet begins with the rejection of Longstreet's proposal for a defensive strategy. Though Lee acknowledges the possibility that Longstreet's defensive theories raise—of the men being wiped out charging up a hill against rifles and artillery—Lee dismisses the concern. He argues against caution and reserve—"you can hold nothing back," he says—and finally concludes that if his men do all die, the heroic nature of their deaths will justify the end. With Lee's refusals, Longstreet suffers a second crisis of faith, this time doubting the general he made a mortal

substitute for the God who failed him.

While the Confederate army is otherwise unified in its devotion to Lee, Shaara's Longstreet resembles another lone dissenter—the second in command of the ill-fated Pequod in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. When Captain Ahab redirects his commercial whaler on a singular mission to slay the whale who maimed him, the voyage ends in the destruction of the vessel and every sailor aboard but one. To the end, the hapless crew act in perfect allegiance to the commander whom they credit with a supernatural authority. Only the first mate Starbuck anticipates the fate of the Pequod, but much like Longstreet, he lacks either the influence to dissuade his captain or the resolve to save the ship by mutiny. Fully prescient of the outcome but unable to forestall Lee's offensive, Longstreet cannot bring himself to subvert the authority of his general, even when John Bell Hood protests that a slight tactical adjustment to the right could spare his soldiers certain slaughter. Though he shares Hood's objection, Longstreet refuses to countermand Lee's order and tells Hood, "the commanding general will not approve a move to the right. I argued it yesterday. I argued it all morning. Hell, I've been arguing against any attack at all. How can I call this one off?" (*Killer Angels*, 197). Hood's troops fail to take the hill and suffer major casualties. Refusing to incriminate their beloved General Lee, the troops hold Longstreet responsible and inaugurate a cultural narrative that blamed Longstreet for the debacle.

Historically, Longstreet was maligned in white Southern memory only after he voiced public support for the Reconstruction policies of the Republican Party. Longstreet urged white Southerners to accept the terms of the war's victors and abandon their terrorist assault on the political rights of African American freedmen. Arguing that the war and its casualties would be for naught if the central political issues remained unsettled, Longstreet asked Lee for public backing. Lee ignored the request. After Lee's death, Southern revisionists blamed Longstreet for the outcome at Gettysburg and ultimately for

the failure of the Confederacy.<sup>40</sup>

When Freemantle misconstrues Lee's earlier successes as the result of a devious man's strategies, he drives Longstreet to a rant that approaches something between insubordination and heresy. Longstreet explains, "The secret of General Lee is that men love him and follow him with faith in him." The army succeeds because it is usually better positioned and matched against lesser Union generals who "don't know how to make decisions." "God, man," he says to Freemantle, "we don't win, because of tricks. What were the tactics at Malvern Hill? What were the tactics at Fredericksburg, where we got down behind a bloody stone wall and shot the bloody hell out of them as they came up, wave after wave [?]" (*Killer Angels*, 245). As Longstreet takes in vain the name of the God whose absence was affirmed by his children's deaths, he repeats the descriptor "bloody," considered a profanity until the early twentieth century. "God in Heaven," he tells Freemantle, "there's no strategy to this bloody war. What it is is old Napoleon and a hell of a lot of chivalry. That's all it is." He builds, then, toward the ultimate blasphemy—a prediction of the disaster that will unfold the next day as the Confederates attempt to take a hill from the bottom ground and, thus, wage an assault similar to the Federals' charge at Fredericksburg. "Tomorrow we will attack an enemy dug in on the high ground," says Longstreet, "and let me tell you, if we win that one it will not be because of tactics or because we are great strategists or because there is anything even remotely intelligent about the war at all." In language reminiscent of Bucklin that suggests both the profanity of Lee's logic and the likely carnage it will yield, Longstreet concludes that for his troops to win under those circumstances, "It will be a bloody miracle, a bloody miracle" (*Killer Angels*, 245). For Longstreet, the articulation of these doubts resembles his apostasy at the death of his children. Just as he realizes the implications of what he has spoken, he shudders and remembers "that day in church when he prayed from the soul and listened and knew in that moment that there was no one there, no one to listen" (*Killer Angels*, 246). In the absence

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen Budiansky, *The Bloody Shirt: Terror After Appomattox* (New York: Viking, 2008), 149-156.

of God, the soldier Longstreet, transfers his faith to a deific general, but Lee, too, refuses to hear the entreaties and causes the repetition of Longstreet's disillusionment.

On the final day at Gettysburg, Longstreet attempts one last time to dissuade Lee from launching a frontal assault. In part, Longstreet's speech to Lee is a statement of belief that now consists entirely of envisioned disaster. "I have to tell you now, sir, that I believe this attack will fail. I believe that no fifteen thousand men ever set for battle could take that hill, sir." In Lee's rising anger, he raises a hand to silence his adjutant, but in what seems a betrayal of his commander and possibly insubordination, Longstreet continues, "It is a distance of more than a mile. Over open ground. As soon as we leave the trees we will be under the fire of their artillery. From all over the field" (*Killer Angels*, 286). In their last preparations and final revue of the lines, Lee affirms his faith, saying, "Well, we have left nothing undone. It is all in the hands of God" (*Killer Angels*, 293). Though he does not say so, the dubious Longstreet thinks to himself "it isn't God that is sending those men up that hill" (*Killer Angels*, 293).

The climactic crisis comes when Longstreet considers his one final option: "There is one thing you can do. You can resign now. You can refuse to lead it" (*Killer Angels*, 294). Here again, Longstreet's predicament echoes that of Starbuck, who after rejecting the possibility of mutiny goes so far as to contemplate murder. Standing before Ahab's cabin door and holding a musket, the lieutenant thinks, "Shall this crazed old man be tamely suffered to drag a whole ship's company down to the doom with him?"<sup>41</sup> Throughout *Moby Dick*, Starbuck is represented as a devout Christian increasingly suspicious of a captain whose power and obsession grow more and more heretical. As Starbuck strains to reconcile his "evil thought" of violence with his Christian morality, Melville describes him as one who "seemed wrestling with an angel." The episode concludes when Starbuck restores the musket to its rack, apparently having chosen faith over transgression, though it means the loss of the ship, the crew,

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<sup>41</sup> Herman Melville, Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker, eds., *Moby Dick* (New York: Norton, 2002), 387.

and his own life.<sup>42</sup>

By comparison, Longstreet has already lost his faith in God and the mortal substitute, Lee; and Longstreet never contemplates violence against his commander as a way to save his men. Though not the murder Starbuck contemplates, the resignation Longstreet considers would constitute the abdication of his one remaining religion—the soldier’s duty. In the end, Longstreet determines that he cannot leave Lee with an attack in the hands of Hill. To do so would be to desert his duty merely because he disagrees with his commander. He wavers, thinking, “Maybe God really wants it this way,” but realizes prophetically, “they will mostly all die. We will lose it here.” And yet, he concludes, “I cannot even refuse, I cannot even back away, I cannot leave him to fight it alone, they’re my people, my boys. God help me, I can’t even quit” (*Killer Angels*, 294).

Longstreet watches the battle from a symbolic perch on a rail fence, where he sits with both arms hugging his chest. His mind, writes Shaara, “was a bloody vacancy, like a room in which there has been a butchering.” Longstreet tries “once formally to pray” but, according to Shaara, “there was no one there and no words came,” so Longstreet repeats to himself, “Heavenly Father, Heavenly Father” (*Killer Angels*, 323). In his despair, Longstreet attempts to ask the intervention of a divine authority but cannot recover his faith as the scene before him reenacts on a larger scale the deaths of Longstreet’s children. His refusal to abandon “my boys” conjures a paternal relationship between the general and his soldiers. The soldiers’ deaths and Longstreet’s failed attempts to pray to a God who isn’t there repeat and amplify the events that have already driven Longstreet “out of his mind, insane” with a father’s grief. They also enact what Buford decries as “the appalling sick stupidity” that could drive its witness to the brink of sudden, violent, complete insanity.

As Shaara’s Longstreet watches the battle “dissolve into nightmare,” the reality of the scene, the author suggests, becomes indistinguishable from the perverse images of a dream. Reality becomes

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 387-88.

nightmare. Longstreet experiences a disturbance of the conscious mind that the author conflates with the unconscious and suggests as a kind of insanity. Longstreet's experience of combat gestures toward what would be described in later wars as shell shock, battle fatigue, and more recently post-traumatic stress disorder. The term nightmare also connotes the dreamer's sense of horror and helplessness, emotions born specifically of Longstreet's dilemma. When the battle clears and the disaster he prophesied has come to its full, awful fruition, Longstreet reflects, "It was all done. Along with all the horror of loss, and the weariness, and all the sick helpless rage, there was coming now a monstrous disgust. He was through. They had all died for nothing and he had sent them" (*Killer Angels*, 324). Though Longstreet may have experienced the same sense of helplessness watching the death of "my boys" that he felt with the passing of his children, he acknowledges his own culpability in the deaths of his men. With that realization, Longstreet picks up a rifle intending to take a suicidal walk forward toward the Federal lines but is interrupted by Lee, who rides forward saying famously, "It is all my fault" (*Killer Angels*, 325). Not until he orders Pickett to re-form his division does the enormity of Lee's mistake become apparent; Pickett, who has lost all of his colonels and most of his men replies, "General Lee I have no division" (*Killer Angels*, 326).

The famous reserve and the unwavering faith of Lee may seem a strange counterpart to the heretical vengeance-lust of Ahab. But much like Melville's Ahab, who peruses his obsession to the destruction of ship and crew, Shaara's Lee maintains a strict fidelity to obsolete warfare in a pursuit of honor that ultimately decimates his army. His disregard of repeated entreaties, even as he acknowledges the likelihood of disaster, further equates Lee with the captain of the Pequod and with the Union generals who disgust Shaara's Buford by the "appalling sick stupidity" of their leadership. Drawing on the infamy of Melville's literary forerunner and on Longstreet's disaffection with the less than godly "father" Lee, the novel strips the Confederate commander of more than a hundred years of Lost Cause adulation. From mythic God-like hero, *The Killer Angels* reduces Lee to the company of

“goddamned idiots” who, in Joseph Bucklin’s rendering, deny the humanity of their men by using them as if they were animals. Shaara’s novel thus demotes Lee from his enduring place of honor. It also decries “The Soldier’s Faith” and its celebrations of futility by subverting the character whose command philosophy most closely resembles the values Holmes espoused in his 1895 Memorial Day address.

The coup de grace is the unexpected enactment of “The Soldier’s Faith” principles by dissident Longstreet. Though his repeated attempts to dissuade the commanding general verge on insubordination, the only act of rebellion Longstreet considers is a refusal to fight, and he concludes even that is impossible. Ever the dutiful soldier, he defies his own instincts, sends his troops to their deaths as ordered, and in the end performs a ritual of “The Soldier’s Faith,” though not because he taps a reservoir of human courage. He knowingly leads men to certain death because he cannot bring himself to do otherwise. The result is neither the laudatory miracle Holmes described nor the bloody one Longstreet calculated as a longshot. To fully discredit “The Soldier’s Faith” the author requires its enactment by the consummate cynic who defies his own common sense only to realize his vision of disaster. In the final reckoning, *The Killer Angels* strikes not a single redemptive note in the futile assault, the soldier’s deaths, or in the emotions they elicit: horror, weariness, rage, disgust.

The ultimate refutation is spoken by Lee himself. Admitting too late that he was wrong, Lee concludes “You and I, we have no Cause. We have only the army. But if a soldier fights only for soldiers, he cannot ever win. It is only the soldiers who die” (*Killer Angels*, 332). With the doctrine of redemptive honor now noticeably absent from Lee’s ruminations, the novel’s greatest proponent of “The Soldier’s Faith” abandons the notion of death as a laudatory end in itself. Here, through words ventriloquized by Lee, Shaara collapses the two oppositional generals into a single type, emphasizing their sameness in a shared singular devotion to duty that ultimately kills their men.

In modernizing his narrative, Shaara replaces much of the Lost Cause tradition—what he

termed “naive religiosity”—with incredulity. In doing so, he denies anything noble to salvage from the futility of the dead soldiers’ sacrifice. Death is pointless precisely because it is also predictable and preventable; attempts to recuperate meaning from that senselessness is impossibly incongruous. As ineffective, archaic generals lead empty pursuits of honor and duty, Shaara transforms what was once the celebrated currency of sectional reunion into unmitigated absurdity.

## **A War to Set Men Free**

As Shaara delegitimizes a narrative that obscured emancipation in Civil War memory, Chamberlain’s belief in the dignity of man underscores a restoration of slavery to the war’s ideological center. The conviction also informs the colonel’s command, ostensibly providing a favorable alternative to officers, whom Bucklin says, use their men as they would cattle. But Shaara, leaving no character unscathed, effects a series of reversals that belie the colonel’s faith and his vision of an America that values human dignity foremost.

In “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” Giovanni Pico della Mirandola outlines the concept that partially informs both Chamberlain’s command decisions and his opposition to slavery. As a tenet of Renaissance Humanism, the dignity of man encompassed the belief that people exist in a hierarchy of beings, slightly lower than angels but superior to animals.<sup>43</sup> God made people in a divine likeness, sowed in them the seeds of all possibility, and left it to human province to choose which qualities to nurture. A person who disobeys divine law or favors sensuality becomes a brute. A person who cultivates the most esteemed faculty of reason becomes an angel. But a dual nature rages in the human

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<sup>43</sup> In this respect, the theory also incorporated principles of “The Great Chain of Being,” the concept that the universe is organized hierarchically as an enormous chain with an “infinite number of links” ranging from the “meagerest kind of existents” to the “highest possible kind of creature,” Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 59.



soul, which Mirandola describes as a “grave, intestine warfare, worse than the civil wars of states.” Intellect elevates the being; emotion degrades it to the status of animals. To assure the triumph of intellect, Mirandola prescribes philosophy itself. This, he says, will establish in the soul a unity and peace like “that which God established in the high places of heaven” and through which people can ascend to heaven as angels. Such a peace would entail that “all souls” achieve a unity with God but also a oneness with each other in “the most profound depths of being.”<sup>44</sup>

For Chamberlain, a former professor at Bowdoin college, a career intellectual-turned-soldier, what surpasses even his belief in God is his belief in America as the “first place on earth” to realize the dignity of man. He describes it as “a new faith.” Here was the birthplace of “true freedom,” where the individual mattered more than the state, where one could “stand up free of the past, free of tradition and blood ties and the curse of royalty and become what he wished to become” (*Killer Angels*, 27). In Chamberlain’s ideal of America, the condition of slavery was a stain on “this incredibly beautiful new clean earth” and was equally “appalling” if not analogous to the serfdom in Old Europe. By this logic, Chamberlain reasons, “If men were equal in America, all these former Poles and English and Czechs and blacks, then they were equal everywhere, and there was really no such thing as a foreigner; there were only free men and slaves” (*Killer Angels*, 27). The freedom for which he fights is depicted as antithetical to “the horror of old Europe, the curse of nobility, which the South was transplanting to new soil” (*Killer Angels*, 27).

The genesis of Chamberlain’s abolitionist ideology can be traced to a formative disagreement with a Southern Baptist minister and a professor from the University of Virginia. Chamberlain later recalls to Buster Kilrain that as he debated the polemics of slavery with the visitors, he found the preacher, to be “so damned *wrong* and moral and arrogant all at the same time that he began to get

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<sup>44</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans., A. Robert Caponigri (1956; repr., Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1999), 8-11, 19-22.

under my skin.” The minister likened the agitation of abolitionists to his keeping “a fine stallion in one of my fields and suddenly one of your Northern abolitionists came up and insisted I should free it.” When Chamberlain responded that the logic in the argument does not hold because “a man is not a horse” the minister, Chamberlain recalls, “replied, very patiently, that *that* was the thing I did not understand, that a Negro was not a man.” After Chamberlain had left the room in disgust, the Virginia professor apologized for having offended Chamberlain in his own home but then attempted to make his case to Chamberlain. The professor explained, “that the minister was a moral man, kind to his children, and that the minister believed every word he said, just as I did, and then he said, ‘My young friend, what if it is you who are wrong?’” (*Killer Angels*, 173). Chamberlain recalls, “I had one of those moments when you feel that if the rest of the world is right, then you yourself have gone mad. Because I was really thinking of killing him, wiping him off the earth” In that instant, Chamberlain realized, “if it was necessary to kill them”—meaning slaveholders—then he would (*Killer Angels*, 173).

Like many of his contemporaries, Shaara does not consider how the experience of slavery differed for men and women, but as the Virginia professor attempts to veil his defense in a paternalism that casts slaves as the “children” of a benevolent master, the minister divulges the essence of chattel bondage in his bald analogy of horse and slave. In his 1845 autobiography, Frederick Douglass defined slavery as the antithesis of human dignity, perpetrated by the mental and physical degradation of bondspeople to a “beast-like” condition.<sup>45</sup> More recently in 2006, David Brion Davis titled his history of new world slavery, *Inhuman Bondage*, to connote the “unconscionable and *unsuccessful* goal of bestializing...(in the form of pets as well as beasts of burden) a class of human beings.”<sup>46</sup> As it denies the humanity of bondspeople, the minister’s assertion, like the institution it defends, violates

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<sup>45</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 57.

<sup>46</sup> David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

Chamberlain's most sacred belief. But, paradoxically, so does his passionate resolution of lethal violence.

As Joseph Bucklin denounces bad commanders who denigrate their soldiers as “cows or dogs, or worse” he casts the revolt of the Second Maine men as a defense of their own humanity, a revolution in miniature. While readers should not infer that the novel employs African American chattel slavery as an allegory for military service or vice versa, Shaara does situate the two as multiple forms of institutional unfreedom within a class-based hierarchy. Meade's options for the prisoners—fight or be shot—along with his later assurance that men who fail to “do their duty” in combat will be punished by “instant death,” suggest a doctrine of coercion that Chamberlain flatly rejects. But finding the right words to sway the transfers is a problem, Chamberlain reflects, because “a man who has been shot at is a new realist, and what do you say to a realist when the war is a war of ideals?” He appeals first to a common experience of hardship, to the regiment's need for the men. Then, he articulates principles of his own cause:

[F]reedom... is not just a word.... This is a different kind of army. If you look at history you'll see men fight for pay, or women, or some other kind of loot. They fight for land, or because a king makes them, or just because they like killing. But we're here for something new. I don't...this hasn't happened much in the history of the world. We're an army going out to set other men free.... This is free ground. All the way from here to the Pacific Ocean. No man has to bow. No man born to royalty. Here we judge you by what *you* do, not by what your father was. Here you can be *something*. Here's a place to build a home. It isn't the land – there's always more land. It's the idea that we all have value, you and me, we're worth something more than the dirt. I never saw dirt I'd die for, but I'm not asking you to come join us and fight for dirt. What we're all fighting for in the end is each other” (*Killer Angels*, 29).

Chamberlain renders the Union cause as one of liberation, though not in terms of its significance to people held in slavery. Framing the argument for his intended audience, he interprets the war in terms of its import to white soldiers who still remain comparatively free. His concern is not primarily for slaves who feel the attempts at dehumanization but for what their experience means to the nation as a whole, how it threatens the freedom of each and all. Chamberlain echoes the ideology of the 1860s

Republican Party, which embraced the nobility of free, educated men earning money through their own labor. Antebellum Republicans understood this “dignity of work” as the cornerstone of Northern society and opposed the territorial extension of slavery as a threat to free labor.<sup>47</sup> They characterized the institution, much like Chamberlain, as a “pestilence” on the nation that reduced the laborer to the status of a “brute.”<sup>48</sup> Chamberlain adds that if the mutineers choose to fight, they will face no further penalty for insubordination. Those who refrain must travel under guard with the promise of fair treatment after the coming battle. He concludes by telling the men, “This is still the army, but you’re as free as I can make you” (*Killer Angels*, 30).

As colonel, Chamberlain strives to act according to his own faith, but the qualification that “this is still the army” suggests an inherent contradiction between the nature of that institution and the freedom Chamberlain claims as the Union cause. In Bucklin’s tirade against gentlemen officers and in Confederate soldiers’ regard of Lee as the model of gentility, the novel evokes a centuries old conflation of officers and gentlemen. Signifying presumptions about behavior—either the refinement his men admire in Lee, or the incompetence that outrages the Union subordinates—the term gentleman also connotes class, either the titled aristocracy of old Europe or the transplanted “nobility” of the Southern slavocracy. Much as Private Bucklin denounces his officers, Buster Kilrain—recently demoted from sergeant for drunkenly slugging an officer—declares to Chamberlain “I’m Kilrain and I goddamn all gentleman” (*Killer Angels*, 174 ). What these characters suggest, perhaps beyond their colonel’s understanding, is that the command structure of the army they all serve replicates the civilian social hierarchies that Chamberlain fights to eradicate. By point of contrast, the biographical sketch of

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<sup>47</sup> Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 8-10, 44-45.

<sup>48</sup> The language of pestilence and brutalization is invoked repeatedly in the speeches of William Seward; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 44-45. On convergence of Republican and anti-slavery ideologies, see also John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (2001; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 23-24.

Lee in the novel's forward reveals the general's position on slavery, which is never allowed reprisal in the narrative proper. Lee does not own slaves nor believe in slavery, but the gentleman general subscribes to the very notions of race and class inequality that Chamberlain sees as an affliction to America.

Freemantle also understands the war as a conflict over slavery and tells his hosts that most of Europe shares his view. The revelation provokes angry rebuttals from junior Confederate officers, including Kemper, who insists he fights to free himself from a tyrannical government. But just as the novel relegates Lee's thoughts on social inequality to a brief character sketch, it minimizes Kemper's claims and offers several refutations, including one from Longstreet. When he learns the source of the camp fracas, Longstreet indicates his annoyance as the narrator avers, "The war was about slavery, all right. That was not why Longstreet fought but that was what the war was about" (*Killer Angels*, 249). Hardly an exculpation of the Confederate cause, Longstreet's prescience renders a judgment on the political question, while the opacity of his personal motivation remains consistent with his fidelity to duty.

In another episode, Tom Chamberlain repeats a conversation he had with three Confederate prisoners, in which he questions their reasons for fighting. Tom assumes their cause is slavery but the captives, "kept on insistin' they wasn't fightin' for no slaves, they were fightin' for their 'rats.'" After several miscommunications, the recollection of which incites giggles from the younger Chamberlain, Tom finally discerns that the men claim to be fighting for his "rights." "After that," says Tom, "I asked this fella what rights he had that we were offendin' and he said, well he didn't know, but he must have some right he didn't know nothin' about. Now, ain't that something?" (*Killer Angels*, 167).

In Tom's mockery of the prisoners, their seemingly unintelligible linguistic patterns, and the indefensible logic of an offense they can't identify, Shaara directs another barb at "The Soldier's Faith." The prisoner whom Tom describes as a "farm type feller" ventriloquizes the arguments asserted

by Kemper and the other Confederate officers who object to the notion of a war about slavery. When Tom's conversant is unable to explain the rhetoric that he parrots, Shaara implies the absurdity of fighting for a cause one little understands. As the man appears to have held the occupation of yeoman farmer, Shaara also suggests a class disparity between the propagandist officers and men, not of the gentry in civilian or military life, who become prisoners for reasons none can name. Most importantly, and by the same strategy, Shaara lampoons the insistence that the Confederate cause was not slavery.

Immediately prior to Tom's account, an encounter with a supposed runaway slave prompts Chamberlain to interrogate what had been his strongest faith. Here, precisely at the midpoint of the novel, a chapter narrated from Chamberlain's perspective becomes the nexus for a broader meditation on freedom, slavery, and national identity. As Michael Shaara suggests slavery's political centrality to the Civil War, he places it, literally, at the center of his own text to precipitate a shameful self-discovery and a crisis of faith for the proselytizer of human equality. Buster Kilrain summons the colonel to the side of a black man on the battlefield, wounded by a gunshot just below the ribs. Chamberlain arrives to find the man attended by two other soldiers, one of whom is the redeemed mutineer Joseph Bucklin. Kilrain speculates how the man came to be bleeding and prostrate on the battlefield: "Guess he was a servant on the march, took a chance to run away. Guess they shot at him" (*Killer Angels*, 164). Chamberlain, who has rarely seen black men, reacts with a fascination that turns to something repellent. As Chamberlain first makes the man an object of curiosity, the colonel's manner is "natural and friendly" but with "unexpected caution." Then, observing that "the man was really very black," Chamberlain experiences a "crawley hesitation" a reluctance to touch him, then again the odd feeling, a "flutter of unmistakable revulsion" (*Killer Angels*, 165).

Feeling ashamed for what he did not even know existed within him, Chamberlain recalls his debate with the proslavery minister and begins to interrogate his own convictions in light of his shameful self-discovery. His reflections occur against the audible speculations of his soldiers about the

market value of the wounded man. Bucklin proposes selling the man so the soldiers can buy their way out of the army (*Killer Angels*, 166). As Bucklin fails to recognize how his proposition contradicts his own harangue against the army's abuse of men and power, Chamberlain backs away and attributes his response to "a matter of thin skin." It is, he says, "A matter of color. The reaction is instinctive. Any alien thing... If I feel this way, even I, an educated man... what was in God's mind?" (*Killer Angels*, 166).

Chamberlain's emotional recalcitrance and his intellectual evaluation of it work in tandem to emphasize the otherness with which he regards the man for whom he professes an ardent sympathy. That characterization is furthered by the difficulty the man and soldiers experience when they try to make themselves understood to one another. With the repetition of "*Baatu, Baatu*," Kilrain infers that English is not man's first language and implies it as a kind of linguistic defect: "God," Kilrain says, "He can't even speak English." Chamberlain speaks seven languages but can't identify the words until he surmises that the man means thank you (*Killer Angels*, 165). The miscommunication is juxtaposed with Tom Chamberlain's account of his conversation with Confederate prisoners who insist they are fighting for their "rats." But neither Chamberlain nor the other soldiers suppose that the man's speech is accented or, alternately, that it might have been inherited through acculturation or oral tradition. They only assume that along with his perceived physical otherness, his language, too, is other—a maker of difference that leads Chamberlain and his soldiers to additional assumptions.

The history they ascribe to the man is in fact a guess, one they hypothesize in the absence of the man's own narration. They attempt to read the man's past from his current circumstances and from his hands which, they conclude, show signs of field work. Chamberlain adds to the speculation when he experiences a wave of sympathy based on another series of presumptions. He thinks,

To be alien and alone, among white lords and glittering machines uprooted by brute force and threat of death from the familiar earth of what he did not even know was Africa, to be shipped in black stinking darkness across an ocean he had not dreamed existed, forced then to work on

alien soil, strange beyond belief, by men with guns whose words he could not even comprehend. What could the black man know of what was happening? Chamberlain tried to imagine it. He had seen ignorance, but this was more than that. What could this man know of borders and states' rights and the Constitution and Dred Scott? What did he know of the war? And yet he was truly what it was all about. It simplified to that. Seen in the flesh, the cause of the war was brutally clear" (*Killer Angels*, 167).

Chamberlain's thoughts recall the contradictory attitudes that manifested among white abolitionists, who worked for emancipation but behaved with racist condescension toward their African American colleagues. A fellow Garrisonian once advised Frederick Douglass to affect his speech on the lecture circuit, saying "'tis not best that you seem too learned," while audiences questioned the veracity of Douglass's testimony on grounds that his education was "a contradiction of all the facts we have concerning the ignorance of slaves."<sup>49</sup> A similar disposition marks the conjecture of Chamberlain, whose intellectual hauteur is self-discrediting both for its obvious racialism and for the factual errors that inform his assumptions. The domestic slave market and simply going about the master's business afforded slaves mobility and opportunities to exchange information—much of it political—through an informal communication network known as the "grapevine telegraph."<sup>50</sup> Booker T. Washington later recalled, "When I was still quite a child, I could hear the slaves in our 'quarters' whispering in subdued tones that something unusual—the war—was about to take place, and that it meant their freedom." He added that his fellow slaves kept the grapevine in "constant use" and stayed informed of war developments so that all knew when Lee surrendered.<sup>51</sup> Though Shaara's Chamberlain commiserates with the presumed slave's ordeal of kidnapping and trans-Atlantic dislocation, the United States

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<sup>49</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 216.

<sup>50</sup> Phillip Troutman, "Grapevine in the Slave Market: African American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 Creole Revolt," in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 203-228; Susan O'Donovan, "Trunk Lines, Land Lines, and Local Exchanges: Operationalizing the Grapevine Telegraph" (Lecture, Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, Yale University, New Haven, CT, December 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Booker T. Washington, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Life and Work, the Original Brought Up-to-Date with Over Half a Hundred Full Page Photo and Halftone Engravings and Drawings by Frank Beard* (Atlanta: Ga., J.L. Nichols & Co, 1901), 19.



prohibited the importation of slaves, effective January 1, 1808, more than fifty-five years before the battle of Gettysburg. One might hypothesize a plausible, if illegal, scenario that could have resulted in a survivor of the international slave trade turning up on the battlefield at Gettysburg, but the point is rather that the imagined history of the man, whose condition of bondage and recent flight is not known with certainty, derives from just such speculation.<sup>52</sup> The man's primary role in the novel is to elicit just that sort of conjecture in order to expose Chamberlain's most deeply disguised notions of racial difference and identity. Contrary to his fervent devotion to an inclusive America, Chamberlain's repeated references to the man as "alien" suggest his exclusion from the national body politic and Chamberlain's departure from his own proclamation that "all men...were equal everywhere, and there was really no such thing as a foreigner" (*Killer Angels*, 27).

Kilrain's secondhand report of a conversation with the wounded man proves the falsehood of other assumptions. The man was not a casualty of Confederate gunfire. In alarming contrast to Lee's reception by a Gettysburg woman asking for his autograph, a local woman shot the mystery man from her porch when he traveled into town to ask directions. Townsfolk greet the commander of the invading army as a celebrity, but they welcome the black émigré with an attempt on his life. In the same conversation, Kilrain reports that the man has "only been in this country a few weeks" and says "he'd like to go home since now he's free" (*The Killer Angels*, 168). This assertion presents a particular challenge to logical interpretation. By "this country," does Kilrain imply that the man has recently migrated to the Northern United States from the somewhere in the Confederacy? Is he supporting Chamberlain's fantasy of a recent oceanic crossing? And how does Kilrain suddenly understand and speak for the man whose speech he formerly could not comprehend? As these

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<sup>52</sup>An illicit traffic continued into the United States, even after the prohibition. Illegal importations continued, particularly in Louisiana until the Civil War and in the Port of New York until 1862, when for the first time an American slave trader received the death penalty. James A. Rawley and Stephen D. Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History*, Rev. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 353, 340.

questions are impossible to answer from the text, the greater significance of Kilrain's report seems to lie with implications for Chamberlain's philosophies of home and freedom. These concepts will receive further consideration in a discussion of Chamberlain's literary allusions, but in the case of the individual whose personal history remains indiscernible in the text, the reality of his freedom falls far short of Chamberlain's ideal of America. The man's experience in town and among the Union liberators highlight the unwillingness of whites to regard him in terms beyond blackness or otherness, even though such exclusion, according to Chamberlain, violates the ideal of America and threatens the freedom of all.

Meanwhile, as Chamberlain's self-discovery reminds him of his conversations with pro-slavery ideologues, a voice of doubt echoes in his consciousness asking him to consider that he might be wrong. When he later recounts his resolution of violent abolition to Kilrain, he also confesses a lingering doubt. When he acknowledged his willingness to kill slaveholders if necessary, something in his consciousness said, "You can not be utterly right." He also admits, "there is still something every now and then which says, 'Yes, but what if you are wrong?'" (*Killer Angels*, 173). The encounter with the wounded man exposes Chamberlain's racialism and leads to a crisis of faith in which the colonel questions his righteousness and that of the violence he has undertaken.

Chamberlain prefaces his account with a question posed to Kilrain: "What do you think of Negroes?" Kilrain admits having "reservations" but concludes "you cannot judge a race. Any man who judges by the group is a peawit." He prescribes, "You take men one at a time." Chamberlain responds by declaring his own faith in human equality. "To me there was never any difference....," says Chamberlain. "I didn't know that many [black men]. But those I knew...well, you looked in the eye and there was a *man*. There was the divine spark, as my mother used to say" (*Killer Angels*, 173). Kilrain attempts to disabuse the colonel of his idealism but reframes the discussion from the question of race to the degeneracy of humanity. He tells Chamberlain, "The truth is, Colonel, that there's no divine spark,

bless you” (*Killer Angels*, 174). Citing discriminatory practices by local taverns—signs that read “Dogs and Irishmen keep out,” he argues the rarity of “good men.” Kilrain disputes Chamberlain’s idealism on the point that humanity as a whole fails to evince divinity or to observe anything resembling social equality. Instead of the peace and oneness of all souls, Kilrain everywhere finds human debasement. Finally, Kilrain derides the notion of mankind’s divinity by recounting the recent burning of a Catholic church with nuns still inside. “There,” he says, “was a divine spark” (*Killer Angels*, 175). In the chapter’s conclusion, Chamberlain again recalls the question raised by the Virginia professor—“But what if it is *you* who are wrong?”—that now clearly applies to his larger faith in humanity. Even as the insurgence of his own racialism challenges his intellectual faith and suggests the deviance of man, even as the smell of death intrudes on his conversation with Kilrain and portends the novel’s end, Chamberlain declares with certainty, “But I am not wrong. Thank God for that” (*Killer Angels*, 176).

In an earlier scene, Chamberlain’s recollections of his family and childhood in Maine explain the significance of the novel’s title. He thinks of his father and a monologue he memorized as a youth: “What a piece of work is man...in action how like an angel” (*Killer Angels*, 116). After hearing the recitation, the father concluded, “Well, boy, if he’s an angel, he’s sure a murderin’ angel.” The remark inspired the son to go to school and deliver an oration on “Man, the Killer Angel” (*Killer Angels*, 116). The speech from which the novel derives its title occurs in Act II Scene II of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Hamlet declares that, to him, the world seems a large prison composed of “many confines, wards, and dungeons,” of which Denmark is “one o’ the worst.” He then reveals his estimation of humankind: “What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god—the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me

—nor woman neither.”<sup>53</sup> Hamlet’s parsing of the nature of humanity first evokes the Renaissance definition of the “dignity of man.” But the prince takes no delight in humanity’s resemblance to the divine. For Hamlet, the contradictory notion of human frailty supplants man’s dignity. In this theory, the Fall tainted the divine image of man, who ever strives to regain his former dignity but is inhibited by the dominance of baser passions. Repeating his disenchantment, Hamlet later connotes the engrafting of a tree trunk or family lineage and insists Virtue “cannot so inoculate our old stock, but we shall relish of it,” meaning that people will ever retain the vestiges of sinfulness as manifested in the Fall.<sup>54</sup> He advises Ophelia to cloister herself in a convent, lest motherhood make her a “breeder of sinners.” He counts pride, ambition and vengefulness among the baser qualities that reduce him and all men to “arrant knaves” whose nature leaves them “crawling” in a subservient and contemptuous posture between earth and heaven.<sup>55</sup> Hamlet’s emphasis on human sinfulness, the pronouncement of man as a “murderin’ angel,” young Chamberlain’s oratory, and the very title of the novel, together render a verdict on human transgression. If men and women are angels, Shaara suggests, they constantly rebel against their own nature, abandon the divine law, and become, through errancy, like animals.

Despite its ostensible randomness, the thought sequence that reveals the derivation of the novel’s title also includes another literary allusion to Melville. Chamberlain remembers his father’s pride in that early speech on “Man: The Killer Angel” and ponders what his father might have thought of his address to the mutineers. His thoughts turn to Home and Mother—the clichéd rhetoric he refused to espouse to the troops—then to his own mother who had wanted him to be a parson. He considers the responsibilities of his current vocation, and then finally arrives at a meditation on home. Chamberlain

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<sup>53</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, with an introduction by Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2.2.298-304. References are to act, scene, and line.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1. 117-116; Shakespeare and Raffel, *Hamlet* 3.1.79n, 80n.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.121-127.

reflects that he has “always felt at home everywhere” and asserts his belief that he would be at home in the desert, Afghanistan, or “far Typee” (*Killer Angels*, 116). Chamberlain feels at home everywhere because in his view, there is “no such thing as a foreigner.” That belief, like his faith in the dignity of man and America, places Chamberlain in direct opposition to Hamlet, who cannot delight in a depraved humanity and who considers the world a prison, especially his native Denmark. It also seemingly marks the difference between Chamberlain and another Melville figure, the narrator who experiences and engenders cultural transformation in his encounter with the residents of “far Typee.”

Chamberlain’s allusion to Melville’s first—and in the nineteenth century, most popular—novel positions the colonel’s ideals of home and human dignity against a much bleaker imputation of human corruption. *Typee* is narrated in the first person by Tom, an American sailor who deserts his ship to escape a despot of a captain. He inadvertently takes refuge among a group of Marquesan islanders notorious for their hostility to outsiders and for their reputed cannibalism. Contrary to the reports, Tom finds the country of the Typee a veritable Eden. Recalling the people’s conduct toward each other during his stay, Tom avers, “I formed a higher estimate of human nature than I had ever before entertained.”<sup>56</sup> However, the Typee’s objections to his leaving their valley lead Tom to consider himself an unwilling detainee. When the Typee importune Tom to submit to facial tattooing, their “annoying requests” rekindle a dread of cannibalism that masks a deeper anxiety about cultural consumption and loss of identity.<sup>57</sup> Not coincidentally, the tattooing Tom finds so abhorrent would formally constitute his religious conversion. While Tom makes his way toward a climactic departure on the beach, he observes as never before “some difference of opinion” forming among the Typee, who begin to conduct themselves more like the belligerent crew of the ship he fled than the people who

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<sup>56</sup> Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (1846; repr., Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 203.

<sup>57</sup> Samuel Otter, *Melville’s Anatomies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 48.

buoyed his faith in humanity. Prefigured as a fall into human corruption, the discord affords Tom's opportunity of escape. His friend Marheyo, sanctions the departure by placing a hand on Tom's soldier and speaking the only English words he knows, "Home" and "Mother." But as another man attempts to stop his getaway vessel, Tom strikes him with a boat hook, proving his own worst judgments about the barbarity of civilization.<sup>58</sup>

As Chamberlain invokes Typee as one of several places where he would be "at home" he defines himself against Melville's Tom, who essentially flees the valley in hysteria over his proposed acculturation. Ultimately, though, Chamberlain proves to have more in common with Melville's Tom than he will admit. At best, Tom invokes the patronizing stereotype of the noble "savage" to cast the Typee as exemplars of human virtue, who are ultimately corrupted by "civilization." Chamberlain's most sympathetic portrayals of the wounded black man are tinged, like Tom's assumptions about the Typee, with irrational emotional responses and psychological projections toward a perceived other.

Beyond the literary figures against whom Shaara's Chamberlain defines his world view, the meaning embedded in his scene of free associative memory also traces in reverse the trajectory of Chamberlain's faith. Chamberlain's insistence that he would be at home anywhere, including Typee, corresponds to his belief that "there is no such thing as a foreigner." Chamberlain's thoughts of Home and Mother evoke rhetoric he would not espouse to his mutineers. But recalling the words of Marheyo's farewell at the critical moment of transformation for Tom and the Typee, the colonel's memory of his own home and mother also prefigures a comparable change for Chamberlain—his Tom-like revulsion in meeting the supposed slave. Reading backward through Chamberlain's memory, we also find hostility toward fire and brimstone preachers that presages his revelation of murderous intent toward religious slaveholders and their academic apologists. His father's clarification that man is a "murderin' angel" corresponds to Kilrain's attempt to disabuse the colonel of his belief in man's

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<sup>58</sup> Melville, *Typee*, 248-250, 252.

divinity.

The reflections of Shaara's Chamberlain in this scene actually begin with the memory of a terrible night at Fredericksburg where, unable to withdraw after the failed attack, he lay among the dead, shielding himself with bodies and listening as the breeze rustled a curtain in a shattered window; it seemed to whisper "never, forever, never, forever." In his image of eternity, eighteenth century Catholic preacher Jacques Bridaine described a clock pendulum uttering only those two words over and over in the silence of a tomb.<sup>59</sup> A 1902 text *Sermons from the Latins* suggests how the Bridaine's image of eternity had become associated with the eternal torments of Hell:

Forever, never; never, forever, are the words that resound continually through hell and add the last drop of bitterness to the misery of the damned. For in the thought of eternity consists the real sting of hell.... If the damned could only feel that their sufferings would cease even after millions and billions of years, hell from that moment would be no longer hell for them, for the hope of redemption would console and sustain them through it all. But as it is, there is no such hope. 'Forever, never,' the demons cry, and the dismal echo answers back from the lowest pit: 'Never, forever.'<sup>60</sup>

Chamberlain's recollection of a night spent among the dead and his evocation of a refrain that represents the absence of hope and impossibility of redemption corresponds to the transformation of faith he experiences at the end of the novel.

### **"Just this Moment He Did Not Believe at All"**

Whether the mutineers of the Second Maine are swayed by Chamberlain's ideological appeal or a more pragmatic aversion to traveling as prisoners, all but six join the regiment. Later, the exigency of

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<sup>59</sup> J. Vila Blake, "Predictoriana: Sensation Preachers," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art*, April 1870, 466, <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=putn;cc=putn;rgn=full%20text;idno=putn0015-4;didno=putn0015-4;view=image;seq=468;node=putn0015-4%3A11;page=root;size=100>.

<sup>60</sup> James Joseph Baxter, Saint Roberto Francesco Romolo Bellarmino, and Paolo Segneri, *Sermons from the Latins* (New York: Benziger, 1902), 129. Google e-book.

commencing battle persuades three more holdouts. Shortly after the battle ensues, Chamberlain sees a man, vaguely familiar, lying dead with half his face shot away. The colonel recognizes him as one of the Second Maine prisoners who had just joined the regiment (*Killer Angels*, 213). The literal defacement and abject death of this reluctant volunteer presages the course of Chamberlain's faith, both in the dignity of mankind and in the cause of freedom.

While Chamberlain concludes his discussion with Kilrain by affirming to himself the righteousness of his cause, Chamberlain's subsequent combat experience does more to erode his belief in the dignity of man than any of the contradictions posed by his own emotions or the treatment of the unnamed black man. In one battle sequence, Chamberlain orders his men to "fix bayonets" and sweep down Little Round Top in a formation like a door to surround advancing Confederate troops. The soldiers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine have used nearly all of their ammunition, and the action is Chamberlain's last desperate attempt to follow orders and hold the line at all costs. To do just that, Chamberlain earlier sends his brother to a vulnerable position in the line, though it leaves Tom exposed to enemy fire. When his men run low on ammunition, Chamberlain envisions with the clarity of a "Biblical dream" the collapse of the army's entire flank if he fails to hold the hill. The charge averts the envisioned disaster and reveals a primal action quite unlike Holmes's gathering of human courage. Around him, Chamberlain's men are "roaring animal screams" as they "bound down through the dark bushes, over the dead and dying and wounded, hats coming off, hair flying, mouths making sounds..." (*Killer Angels*, 222).

Later, reflecting on the successful bayonet maneuver and his orders to Tom, Chamberlain reflects, "Must think on the theology of that: plugging a hole in the line with a brother. Except for that, it would all have been fine. An almost perfect fight, but the memory of that is a jar, is wrong" (*Killer Angels*, 300). Chamberlain's recurrent guilt during the battle and afterward implies something sinful in his use of Tom. When Chamberlain's thoughts turn to his wife and two children, he reflects on the



difficulty of returning home after a day that averts his vision of disaster but has become “a dream” (*Killer Angels*, 270). Chamberlain also appears detached from the principals that prompted him to volunteer. Exhausted, Chamberlain thinks, “all those noble ideals, all true, all high and golden in the mind, but he was just too tired, and he had no need to talk about it” (*Killer Angels*, 272). The experience of command and combat precipitate fundamental changes for Chamberlain, which the colonel expects will hinder his return home and to former selfhood. But if that experience separates Chamberlain from his idealism, then the death of Buster Kilrain severs it altogether. Shot under the arm, Kilrain is expected to recover from his wounds. Instead, he dies of heart failure. At the moment Tom carries the news to his brother, Chamberlain reflects on his faith:

Sometimes he believed in a Heaven, mostly he believed in a Heaven; there ought to be a Heaven for young soldiers, especially young soldiers, but just as surely for the old soldier; there ought to be more than just that metallic end, and then silence, then the worms, and sometimes he believed, mostly he believed, but just this moment he did not believe at all, knew Kilrain was dead and gone forever, that the grin had died and would not reappear, never, there was nothing beyond the sound of the guns but the vast dark, the huge nothing, not even silence, just an end (*Killer Angels*, 302).

Mark Schantz has argued that antebellum Americans carried into the Civil War an understanding of Heaven as “a material place, a land, a country in which individual bodies and souls would be perfected and the relations of family and friendship restored.”<sup>61</sup> According to Schantz, this popular concept cast Heaven as a place where people would live in “harmonious accord with one another.”<sup>62</sup> To illustrate this concept, Pennsylvania pastor H. Harbaugh, drew an analogy between Heaven and the Biblical Eden.<sup>63</sup> The concept of Heaven that would have been held by Chamberlain’s contemporaries bears a remarkable resemblance to Chamberlain’s perfectionist vision of America. But as Chamberlain receives the news of Kilrain’s death and finds that he “does not believe at all,” he unconsciously recites

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<sup>61</sup> Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country : The Civil War and America’s Culture of Death* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 38.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

the refrain of the hopeless—forever, never.<sup>64</sup> Chamberlain’s faith in the dignity of man is the foundation of his belief in America and his fervor for abolition. As he trades this faith for a vision of bodily decay, his denial of Heaven marks the reversal of his entire belief system.

This ideological about-face echoes a similar reconsideration by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., exhorter of the “The Soldier’s Faith.” In his youth, Holmes had joined the army as a devotee to the cause of abolition. He returned home a disillusioned veteran who, according to Louis Menand, “carefully erased every connection between his experience as a soldier and his views as an abolitionist.”<sup>65</sup> Holmes destroyed his wartime diary and any correspondence that hinted at his former proclivities. As Menand explains, abolition came to represent to Holmes “the kind of superior certitude that drives men...to kill one another.”<sup>66</sup> The violence he witnessed as a soldier persuaded Holmes to distrust moral causes and convinced him that wars of ideals—like the one he shared with Shaara’s Chamberlain—led to the kind of human slaughter he formerly dubbed “the butcher’s bill.”<sup>67</sup> Holmes demonstrated his persistent wariness in judicial rulings that refused to uphold African American civil rights.

The final scene of *The Killer Angels* situates a lone Chamberlain overlooking the battlefield, which in full realization of his memory of the wind at Fredericksburg, resembles the “gray floor of hell” (*Killer Angels*, 333). Against this tableau, he evokes Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, in which a complex plot consists of three elements: a reversal of circumstances, a change from ignorance to knowledge, and a scene of suffering, marked by “destructive or painful action, such as death on the

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<sup>64</sup> Lee does the same in his final conversation with Longstreet when he says, “It is the same question forever, what else can we do? ... But if a soldier fights only for soldiers, he cannot ever win”; Shaara, *The Killer Angels*, 332.

<sup>65</sup> Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 62.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage : The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*, 1st Free Press pbk. ed. (New York: Free Press: Distributed by Simon & Schuster, 1989), 252.

stage, bodily agony, [or] wounds.”<sup>68</sup> As Shaara conjures this definition to characterize the form of his own narrative, he also attempts to translate the scene of suffering into what readers will recognize as psychological trauma. “So this is tragedy...In the presence of real tragedy you feel neither pain nor joy nor hatred, only a sense of enormous space and time suspended, the great doors open to black eternity, the rising across the terrible field of that last enormous, unanswerable question” (*Killer Angels*, 334). Much as Chamberlain and Longstreet experience battle as a waking dream, Chamberlain views the aftermath with numbness so absolute, it suggests the dissociation of his consciousness from emotion and events. As Cathy Caruth explains, an initial traumatic event like Chamberlain’s confrontation with death occurs as “a breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world.”<sup>69</sup> The event is experienced “too soon, too suddenly, too unexpectedly to be fully grasped by consciousness” and only becomes accessible belatedly as the individual relives the events through intrusive flashbacks, compulsive repetition, or nightmares.<sup>70</sup> Shaara casts Chamberlain’s breach as a component of literary tragedy, as a transition from nescience to awareness, from idealism to disillusionment. Meanwhile the author assigns much broader import to the phenomenon of repetition.

Chamberlain’s solitude is interrupted by Tom, who ascends the hill, and reflects on the battle. He reminds his brother of the central political conflict of the war and wonders at the peculiarity that the dead men before them had put up such a fight “all for slavery.” The reminder startles the colonel, who had “forgotten the Cause...completely” when the firing began. To Chamberlain, “It seemed very strange now to think of morality, or that minister long ago, or the poor runaway black” (*Killer Angels*, 335).

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<sup>68</sup> Aristotle distinguishes between simple and complex tragedy. Simple tragedy consists of a plot reversal without recognition, or the passage from ignorance to experience; Aristotle and S. H. Butcher, *Poetics* (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 1997), 21.

<sup>69</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience : Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 101.

Chamberlain never disputes slavery as the Cause or the central conflict of the war, but his silent reflections overshadow his assent to Tom. “He was thinking of Kilrain: *no divine spark*. Animal meat: the Killer Angels” (*Killer Angels*, 335). The tableau of bodies covering the hillside prompts Chamberlain to remark, in memory of Kilrain, that the social hierarchy reflected in military ranks has been equalized. From the war and Chamberlain’s willingness to kill enslavers of men, equality has come to fruition but in abject death that leaves the idealist’s moral vision unrealized. Instead of peace, unity and angelic assent to Heaven, the scene before him tells of the war still to come, the reduction of men to “animal meat” and of Heaven as either non-existent or a place impossible to reach, given people’s animal natures. For the related concept of nation, his denial of Heaven also suggests the unattainability of Chamberlain’s America. Chamberlain abdicates his faith in human dignity and adopts an estimation of man that echoes his father, Kilrain, and the Hamlet.

He realizes, too, that his work is not yet complete and feels an “appalling thrill” with the realization that “they would fight again, and when they came he would be behind another stone wall waiting for them.” He looks forward to that moment with an “incredible eagerness.” He no longer fights a “war of ideals” but reverts to what he had cited to his men as an older, coarser imperative. Seemingly, he now resolves to fight because he enjoys killing. In Chamberlain’s metamorphosis from idealist to apostate, he comes to embody, like the Tom of Melville’s *Typee*, the very thing he abhors.

Like Chamberlain, Michael Shaara never refutes slavery as the political cause of the war, but the novel ends on a vision of humanity that seemingly encompasses American slavery and the Civil War:

The light rain went on falling on the hills above Gettysburg, but it was only the overture to the great storm to come. Out of the black night it came at last, cold and wild and flooded with lightning. The true rain came in a monster wind, and the storm broke in blackness over the hills and the bloody valley; the sky opened along the ridge and the vast water thundered down, drowning the fires, flooding the red creeks, washing the rocks and the grass and the white bones of the dead, cleansing the earth and soaking it thin and rich with water and wet again with clean cold rainwater, driving the blood deep into the earth, to grow again with the roots toward

Heaven (*Killer Angels*, 336).

Alternating between earth and heaven, as in Hamlet's contemplation of the essence of man, the passage declares an opposition between the forces of nature and the blood shed by the violence of man. Rather than purging what stands for man's sinful rebellion against the divine, the rain only drives the blood deeper into the earth where, like Hamlet's "old stock," it will grow again. The irregular syntax of the last line suggests an image of roots pointed toward heaven and growth in the opposite direction, away from heaven and from the divine creation. The image of soil defiled with blood also reprises Chamberlain's regard of slavery as a scourge on the "beautiful new clean earth" of America and the violence he undertakes to preserve the ideals of the founding. The narrative proper culminates in Shaara's suggestion that the battle of Gettysburg and the war about slavery, is an extension of the legacy of the American Revolution: "It rained all that night. The next day was Saturday, the Fourth of July." Conflating images of nature and cycles of human depravity, Shaara's association reprises an assessment of the war advanced by Arthur Freemantle.

After provoking Confederate officers with the suggestion that theirs was a fight to preserve slavery, Freemantle offers an extended interior commentary that immediately precedes Chamberlain's encounter with the presumed fugitive. Like Chamberlain, Freemantle understands the war as a dispute over slavery and class with the principles of the founding ultimately at stake. But Freemantle, as external critic, sees the war as evidence of the futility of the American Revolution. Suggesting that the American founding was a pointless endeavor, he declares, "What a tragic thing, that Revolution. Bloody George was a bloody fool. But no matter. The experiment doesn't work. Give them fifty years, and all that equality rot is gone" (*Killer Angels*, 160). Soldiers on both sides of the Civil War and of Shaara's novel see themselves as defenders of democracy. But as they engage in another bloody fight over substantially the same question of human freedom, to Freemantle, the war and its causes already signal the failure of that experiment. Not coincidentally the commentaries on Revolutionary legacy and

human depravity that prevail at novel's end are the insights of a British colonel and a Union private of Irish descent. One is an international observer, the other a sentient of anti-Irish nativism. Both are relative outsiders. Meanwhile, as Shaara writes *The Killer Angels* with the knowledge that the war will ultimately decide slavery but leave unresolved the question of social equality, the suggestion of future growth from the blood at Gettysburg anticipates future betrayals of the dignity of man.

The skepticism that prevails in *The Killer Angels* may not be absolute. Chamberlain proposes that he may one day return to Gettysburg and make sense of his experience. The qualification that “*just this moment* he did not believe *at all*” [emphasis mine] suggests a potential variation of time and degree and thus, the possibility, ever-so slight, that Chamberlain might recover some of what he has lost. But as Shaara signifies the ethical conflicts of *Hamlet* in the very title *The Killer Angels*, he casts American slavery, the resulting Civil War, and the death it reaps as products of an inherent corruption. Whether in the Confederate fight for “freedom” to reproduce a slaveholding republic or in Chamberlain’s racist contradiction and eventual surrender of idealism, Michael Shaara concludes *The Killer Angels* with a stronger contention for the impossibility of realizing Chamberlain’s moral vision of America.<sup>71</sup>

*The Killer Angels* evokes slavery to challenge some of the most enduring narratives Americans tell about their national identity. Unfortunately, the novel never allows more than the scantest representation of the singular figure who stands generally for those whom hypocrisy and moral transgression have injured. Each person the man encounters perceives him in terms of difference that threatens either to end his life or—if Bucklin has his way—spend it to purchase the freedom others. Shaara employs this experience to critique the hypocrisy of his most ardent spokesmen for individual rights, but as he does, he reproduces behavior and political structure he aims to belie. The man is black.

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<sup>71</sup> On the opposite page, Shaara quotes Winston Churchill’s *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* in a final application of irony that positions his arguments against the most prominent cultural narratives of the Civil War: “Thus ended the great American Civil War, which must upon the whole be considered the noblest and least avoidable of all the great mass conflicts of which till then there was a record”; Shaara, *The Killer Angels*, 337.

Literally and figuratively, he is wounded by white racism. In *The Killer Angels*, that is the entirety of his story.

By the time *The Killer Angels* was published, academic historians had also turned their attention to the fundamental contradiction between the principles of the U.S. founding and the fact of American slavery. In 1966, David Brion Davis highlighted the issue in his Pulitzer Prize winning study, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. In 1975, Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery American Freedom* asked not only how slavery could have persisted after the Revolution but also how slaveholders had been some of the most important architects of the new republic. The book's most important scholarly contribution was its attention to the process by which slavery, which initially was neither racialized or a lifelong institution, eventually became both.

As Michael Shaara answers the paradox of American slavery with a meditation on the darkest aspects of human nature, he also anticipates what would become a prominent theme of war literature. Philip Beidler identifies a commonality among American novels of the Vietnam War, particularly those published after 1975. According to Beidler, these novels tell of a "passage of innocence to experience" and cast the war in Vietnam "as some ultimate crucible of the American soul." These novels divulge a "dirty secret" about a war that "seemed to go on mainly because no one with any authority had the sense to stop it." The secret, according to Beidler is that "to go 'Out There' in Vietnam...is to run the risk of cutting free from whatever it was that once defined humanity and even worse, perhaps never being able to again get back to it."<sup>72</sup> The language of otherworldliness echoes the attitudes of *Typee*'s narrator and of Shaara's Union soldiers toward the presumed fugitive. Lee's command and Chamberlain's abandonment of faith in humanity also find concordance in representations of the Vietnam War. Yet much of the irony and skepticism that pervade Michael Shaara's text have been rejected by or lost on the cultural mythmakers who claim *The Killer Angels* as their inspiration and co-

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<sup>72</sup> Philip D. Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 162.

opt its notion of tragedy.



## Chapter 7

### Seven Generations of “An American Family” in Slavery and Freedom: The Cultural Phenomenon of *Roots*

In 1976, a freelance magazine writer and amanuensis to Malcolm X presented a much anticipated chronicle about a family of slaves and their descendants. The book spanned seven generations. The family was the author’s own. He developed the narrative from oral traditions he heard as a child and spent the better part of a decade corroborating the story with archival records. All told, Alex Haley spent twelve years researching and writing what he saw not just as the tale of his enslaved ancestors but as the collective story of African Americans. He began his research during the hundredth anniversary of the Civil War and published the book in the bicentennial year of the American Revolution. Observing the latter fact in his dedication, Haley offered *Roots: the Saga of an American Family* as a birthday present to his country.

Haley’s book soared to the top of U.S. bestseller lists and was awarded special prizes by the Pulitzer and National Book Award committees. Adapted into a twelve-hour miniseries, *Roots* became a television megahit, then two years later, begat a popular sequel. *Roots* begins in 1750 Gambia, with the birth of a character based on Haley’s fourth-great grandfather. Much of the book’s initial popularity stemmed from the author’s identification of this forebear, who, according to Haley, was kidnapped and taken to Annapolis as a slave in 1767 and sold to a Virginia planter. The narrative shifts several times and takes the direct lineal descendants between Kunta Kinte and Alex Haley as the central character in each epoch. *Roots*, therefore, has many protagonists, including the author, who writes himself and his quest to discover his African heritage into the book’s conclusion. Yet the ultimate protagonist of *Roots* is Kunta Kinte, who inaugurates a family oral tradition that Haley claimed as his first and most important source. In keeping with that tradition, Kunta Kinte of the narrative teaches his daughter enough of his native language that it is told by parents and grandparents to each child born into the

family for almost two centuries. These few words, according to Haley, allowed him to trace his ancestry to the Mandinka tribe of Gambia.

In the final three chapters of *Roots*, Alex Haley recounts how the oral history he heard as a child spurred his mission to document that family lore and identify the patriarch known to descendants as “The African.” Haley had already told the story of his ancestral odyssey many times. In the years leading up to the release of *Roots*, he published accounts in several newspapers, journals, and magazines and often lectured about the project so that he could earn enough money to complete the manuscript. But as the denouement of his seven-generation chronicle, the story of Haley’s quest brings full circle a family saga that, by the author’s account, owes its very existence to oral tradition. Haley celebrates that tradition in the sections inspired by his ancestors and in his story of how he brought *Roots* into being.

The emphasis on spoken, rather than written histories, also ostensibly seeks to validate the oral histories of slaves and their descendants, whose recollection of the institution differed immensely from the versions that made it into history books. Only in the few years prior to the publication of *Roots* had academic historians begun to recognize the value of slave narratives, sources they had long viewed as biased, though they had not applied the same standard to the written records of slaveholders, whose views were accepted without question. Until the publication of *Slave Culture*, the prevailing thesis held that slaves had no culture because their connections to Africa had been destroyed by the trauma of the Middle Passage. To a limited extent, *Roots* incorporates these scholarly developments by suggesting continuities between African traditions and slave customs in colonial Virginia, but only Kunta Kinte recognizes these continuities because, according to the newly enslaved Kunta, lifelong inherited bondage, not the Middle Passage, destroys slaves’ awareness of their ancestral and cultural origins.

Haley sought to counteract that erasure by offering his ancestors as the archetype of slave experience. “Why have I called it, *Roots*?” Haley explained, “Because it not only tells the story of a

family, my own, but also symbolizes the history of millions of American blacks of African descent. I intend my book to be a buoy for black self-esteem—and a reminder of the universal truth that we are all descendants of the same Creator.”<sup>1</sup> Whether informed by family stories or by popular books and film, most readers’ knowledge of slavery probably concentrated on the late antebellum era, in the years between the cotton revolution and emancipation. Kunta Kinte’s bondage begins in the colonial era, coincides with the American Revolution, and extends into the early republic. From nineteenth century slave narratives to more recent novels like *Jubilee* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the trajectory of slavery stories, with few exceptions, begins in slavery and ends with freedom. By beginning his story in Gambia, in freedom, Haley reverses that trajectory. He follows his protagonist into slavery and narrates the experience from the perspective of someone who retains the memory of his life before enslavement.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his account of Kunta’s early life, Haley contrasts the slavery practiced by the Mandinkas with that of the kidnappers who pose a constant danger to the native peoples of West Africa. Foreshadowing Kunta’s own abduction, the recurrent discussions of slavery are central to his education. The first reference to slavery occurs as Kunta’s mother chides her eldest son for agitating his baby brother. Her patience exhausted, Binta threatens to summon the “toubob,” what in Haley’s account the Mandinka call the “hairy, red-faced, strange-looking white men whose big canoes stole people away from their homes.”<sup>3</sup> In reality, the Mandinka word *Tubaaboo* or the Wolof word *Tubaab*,

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Haley, “My Search for Roots,” *The Reader’s Digest*, May 1974, 78.

<sup>2</sup> Speaking of the book’s adaptation to film, producer Stan Margulies described the story of *Roots* as “Freedom to freedom—that boy running free in the forest to the freeing of his descendants after the Civil War. And the 100 years of slavery in between”; Stan Margulies quoted in Cecil Smith, “‘Roots’: The Saga of an American Family,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

<sup>3</sup> Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, 30th anniversary ed. (1976; repr., New York: Vanguard Books, 2007), 27. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Roots*.

simply means “European,” but Haley’s derivative carries a more sinister connotation.<sup>4</sup> In their earliest incarnation, slavers in *Roots* acquire the persona of mythical bogeymen that mothers invoke to frighten their children into good behavior. The threat becomes more eminent, however, when Kunta grows old enough to assume his duties as a goatherd. One of the older boys who teaches Kunta his new job also instructs him never to leave the sight of his companions or let the goats wander off where he might have to chase them into the deep bush alone; otherwise, the boy warns, “your family may never see you again” (*Roots*, 38).

Spurred by inquiries from his younger brother Lamin, Kunta asks his father, “What are slaves?” and prompts the first of two important conversations with Omoro on the nature of slavery. Typically, Kunta’s exchanges with his father are marked by their brevity and a sparing use of language that leaves the son to infer much of the father’s meaning. Omoro departs from his usual austerity only when a brush with a panther raises concern for Kunta’s safety and when Omoro discusses slavery with his sons. The father’s uncommon candor signals the importance of these conversations to the narrative as a whole, as well as to the Mandinkas’ social organization, history, and survival. Of Mandinka slavery, Kunta learns that people may be born into it as the child of slave parents; they may be captured as prisoners of war or enslaved as punishment for a crime; or they may become slaves willingly. This is the case with some who took masters in Juffure rather than starving to death in their own villages. At one point, some of the less affluent parents of Kunta’s schoolmates, including slaves, pledge a month of farm labor to the village teacher in return for their children’s education. At other times, the Council of Elders resolves debt disputes by ordering the debtors to work off their obligations as the temporary slaves of the people they owe. Cases of adultery are also sometimes resolved in this manner.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David P. Gamble, “Postmortem: A Study of the Gambian Section of Alex Haley’s ‘Roots,’” *Gambian Studies* 39 (August 2000): 62-63, Gambian Studies Series, St. Mary’s College of Maryland, [http://www.smcm.edu/gambia/david\\_gamble.html](http://www.smcm.edu/gambia/david_gamble.html).

<sup>5</sup> According to David Gamble, Haley bases much of his discussion of Mandinka slavery on Mungo Park’s *Travels in the*

Unlike the lifelong bondage that Kunta and his descendants eventually endure, the Mandinka slavery Haley represents is not a permanent institution, nor are slaves relegated to a fixed social status. Some slaves farm on shares with their masters and use their portion of the earnings to buy their freedom, while others marry into their masters' families. Slaves who surpass their masters' wealth and take slaves of their own similarly suggest the prospect of social mobility. Etiquette dictates that people should not speak of slaves in their presence, as though the reminder of their servitude constitutes an insult. Kunta is surprised to learn that some of Juffure's most respected elders are slaves, including the beloved storyteller Nyo Boto, of whom the child is especially fond. One of the tribe's most celebrated historical figures is the ex-slave general Sundiata, who freed himself from a bad master and built an army of runaway slaves. Perhaps as a result of Sundiata's experience, the Mandinkas extend protections to the enslaved. As Omoro explains, the rights of slaves are "guaranteed by the laws of our forefathers" (*Roots*, 69). All slaves are entitled to food, clothing, shelter, a farm plot, and a spouse. With the exception of convicted criminals, who forfeit their rights by the commission of a crime, slaves have a limited right to choose their own masters; no sale can be transacted without the slave's approval of the buyer.

After a visit to Nyo Boto during which she recounts her own enslavement, Kunta and his brother eventually return to their father to learn more about the white slavers. Nyo Boto tells the children that when she was a young widow, slave raiders attacked her village. They captured the people who were able to travel and killed everyone who was too old or too young to make the journey back to their ships. Among the murdered were Nyo Boto's mother and two babies. Nyo Boto became a slave in Juffure when the raiders sold her for a bag of corn, an exchange that likely spared her Kunta's eventual fate or possibly death. As Kunta and Lamin seek more information from their father, Omoro tells them

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*Interior Districts of Africa*. Gamble also aptly observes that Haley attempts to "distinguish between African slavery where the slave (if born a slave) had certain defined rights (and could not be sold unless they had committed a crime) from slavery in America where the slave was stripped of all his identity, and had no rights." Gamble, "Postmortem," 105.

that shortly after Kunta's birth, he joined his two older brothers on a journey to observe the activities of white slavers. Recounting what he witnessed, Omoro repeats the goatherd's warning never to go out alone and cautions his sons to be vigilant, even when they reach adulthood. As Omoro speaks of "stealings," his language emphasizes enslavement as a theft of human beings. He describes in detail the dehumanizing treatment that he calls "the difference between slaves among ourselves and those whom toubob takes away to be slaves for him" (*Roots*, 77). He says he witnessed slaves with their heads shaved, who were forced to jump on command. Their mouths were forced open and examined, as was every other part of their bodies. The slaves were branded and then ferried in small boats to the slave ships. Some of the people dropped to their stomachs, "clawing and eating the sand," as if desperate to "get one last hold and bite" of their homeland (*Roots*, 77). They fought against the whips and clubs used against them. Some who jumped overboard were attacked by sharks. Omoro describes a form of slavery that in every imaginable way seeks to deprive the enslaved of their humanity. This, according to Omoro, is the fundamental difference between the slavery practiced by the Mandinkas and the bondage imposed by the white slavers.

Later, as Kunta and Omoro journey to the new village founded by Kunta's uncles, they pass through a village populated only by the old, the infirm, and a few infants. The villagers explain that they were attacked by slave raiders, who captured or killed all their young people. When Kunta is old enough to attend the Council of Elders meetings, the main topic of discussion, as it has been for more than a hundred years, is the disappearance of slaves stolen by the "toubob." At one meeting, a young woman who managed to escape her kidnappers seeks the Council's advice after she gives birth to a light-skinned baby and becomes an outcast among her people. Haley does not relate the Council's decision, but the sexual assault evidenced by the birth foreshadows a similar experience for Kunta's daughter. The Council meetings also reveal the pariah status of the *slatee*. According to Haley, black helpers of the "toubob" who assist in the enslavement of other Africans are despised as traitors to their

people. As with “toubob,” Haley ascribes a negative connotation to black merchants who sold enslaved blacks but who typically were held in high regard for their extensive knowledge of geography, natural resources, and wars along their trade routes.<sup>6</sup>

Gambian historian David Gamble has argued that *Roots* misrepresents eighteenth century Juffure as isolated and “untainted by the outside world” when, in fact, the villagers had regular contact with European slave traders, who made nearby St. Andrews—later St. James—Island their base of operations.<sup>7</sup> If the early chapters of *Roots* represent a falsely idealized Africa, Kunta’s coming of age story is deeply concerned with his increasing awareness of the dangers posed by human traffickers. The more conscious Kunta grows of the threat, the more imminent his own capture becomes. It was that very moment, Haley said, that allowed him to match the U.S. and Gambian oral traditions. According to Haley, Kunta Kinte went out alone to chop wood for a drum and was never seen by his family again.

After three failed attempts to write Kunta Kinte’s trans-Atlantic crossing, Haley booked passage on a freighter bound from Liberia to Florida. Haley, an ex-Coast Guardsman whose first authorial efforts were ghostwriting love letters for his shipmates, often went to sea to write. On this trip, he wanted to identify as much as possible with his character, so that he could recreate Kunta’s experience.<sup>8</sup> Haley later recounted that ten-day crossing on the aptly named *African Star*, as a turning point in the writing of *Roots*. To simulate the slaves’ conditions, the author said he slipped into the cargo hold without the crew’s knowledge, stripped down to his underclothes, and lay on a wooden board while he tried to imagine what Kunta Kinte heard, thought, and felt. His initial efforts, Haley later recalled, produced a severe head cold but no pages. Then, on the third night as he stood on deck, burdened by the pressures of writer’s block, mounting debts, and deadlines, Haley said he briefly

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 61-62.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 56, 44.

<sup>8</sup> For Haley’s account of his early writing career in the Coast Guard, see Alex Haley, “Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy,” *The Oral History Review* 1 (1973): 6-7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3675136>.

considered stepping off the stern of the ship into the sea. At that instant, he later recounted, he heard the voices of his ancestors urging him to forge ahead with their story. After that, he was able to complete a draft of Kunta's slave ship experience, which includes the case of a man who jumps overboard to his death, rather than remain a prisoner.<sup>9</sup>

The experience of the Middle Passage Haley imagines for Kunta is characterized by filth and the imposition of inhuman suffering that makes Kunta wonder "if he had gone mad" (*Roots*, 194). His kidnapping is related through recollections once he is bound in the hold of the ship. He mentally relives his assault and capture, then jerks himself awake, not knowing he had been asleep as his mind replayed the scenes. "It had been a nightmare," he realizes, "or was the nightmare this stinking blackness?" (*Roots*, 196). For Kunta, the unconscious nightmare is indistinguishable from the waking reality of being shackled in the darkness, unable to move, and preyed upon by rats and lice while he lies in his own waste.

To survive this nightmare, Kunta and his fellow captives forge a Pan-African sensibility that Kunta carries with him into slavery. When the captives are taken on deck to exercise, Kunta sees for the first time the other men to whom he has been shackled for weeks. After their mutual recognition, Kunta and the fellow prisoner from the Wolof tribe become more eager to communicate and do their best to recall what little each knows of the other's language (*Roots*, 214). The same phenomenon occurs throughout the hold of the ship, where unknown words are passed along until they reach the ear of someone with the knowledge to translate (*Roots*, 218). As the men begin to communicate with their fellow captives, they realize a sense of community that is encouraged by a Mandinka elder. After another man is beaten by the crew, the elder shouts in the darkness, "Share his pain! We must be in this place as one village" (*Roots*, 205). The survivors endure their experience in part by developing a Pan-

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<sup>9</sup> "Aboard the African Star," transcribed from Alex Haley talk at Reader's Digest, October 10, 1991, in *Alex Haley the Man Who Traced America's Roots* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Association, 2007), 80-85.



African fellowship that transcends geographic and tribal identifications.<sup>10</sup> “Though they were of different villages and tribes,” writes Haley, “the feeling grew that they were not from different peoples or places” (*Roots*, 218). The men forge their collective sense of community through the two aspects of their experiences that they all share in common: their broad continental origins in Africa and the trauma of enslavement.

The first exercise outing inaugurates another form of communication in the songs sung by the slave women who help the men plot revolt. The women’s singing is a deceptively “happy sound” that tells of their sexual abuse by the ship’s crew (*Roots*, 212). Each subsequent time the men are brought on deck, the women sing to relay intelligence that will help in the planning of a rebellion, including the fact that the women have hidden weapons on deck for the men to use when they go against the crew. Among the would-be insurrectionists, two schools of thought develop. A Foulah man, who chokes a *slatee* to death when he is discovered among captives, counsels caution, particularly as a second unknown *slatee* remains among the prisoners and might easily betray their plans. The second camp is led by a Wolof who urges immediate action. Before the captives can reach a consensus, the Wolof initiates the revolt and manages to kill at least one crew member and batter four others before being decapitated. The sense of community that develops among the enslaved and their surreptitious passing of information establish a pattern that will recur through multiple generations of U.S. slavery. Though the suppressed slave ship revolt is the only violent uprising in which Haley’s bondspeople are directly involved, they stay informed of every major slave rebellion inside and sometimes beyond the borders of what will become the United States. Their methods of acquiring and sharing information relate to the larger connected themes of orality and resistance. Meanwhile, the Pan-African sensibility he develops

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<sup>10</sup> David Chioni Moore notes that Kunta Kinte “does not think of himself in African terms” until after he has been torn away from his homeland. Kunta’s African identity, according to Moore, is thus an “‘extra-’ or ‘post’ – African phenomenon.” David Chioni Moore, “Routes: Alex Haley’s *Roots* and the Rhetoric of Genealogy,” *Transition* 64 (1994): 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2935303>.

aboard the ship comes to define Kunta Kinte's sense of selfhood and his estimation of other bondspeople.

### **Acculturation and African Identity in Colonial North America**

When he arrives in mainland North America, his recognition of two black men as members of the Mandinka and Serere tribes initially reassures Kunta that "he and his mates weren't alone after all in this terrible land!" (*Roots*, 248). The presence of the two men also suggests to Kunta that he and his fellow captives might be "spared from the cooking cauldron" that Mandinkas believe to be the ultimate misfortune of their stolen people. Kunta's initial reaction reprises the Pan-Africanism that develops in the hold of the ship, but he is soon disappointed and baffled by the black men's apparent obedience to whites. He cannot understand why these black men serve the white slave owners instead of running away or attempting to kill their masters (*Roots*, 248). At the slave market, Kunta tries to appeal to the man with "distinctly Wolof features" who leads him by a chain. By his silent expression, "Kunta's eyes [entreat] this black one...My Brother, you come from my country," but Kunta's fellow slave takes no notice and renders no assistance (*Roots*, 255). As their wagon approaches the home of the man who bought him, Kunta wonders if this is the place where he will be eaten. As other blacks approach the wagon, he wonders if they might free him, but he is again disappointed when they only laugh, as though amused by his suffering (*Roots*, 258-259).

The cannibalism that Kunta fears as his eventual lot is first reported to him as a child, when he asks his father where the kidnappers take their victims. Relating what he has been told by the elders, Omoro says the people are taken to "a land where slaves are sold to huge cannibals called toubabo koomi, who eat us" (*Roots*, 78). Years later, as Kunta listens to the Council of Elders discuss the slavers' activities, Haley describes the phenomenon as "stealing people and shipping them in chains to

the kingdom of white cannibals across the sea” (*Roots*, 157). Since no survivors have ever returned from that distant land to relate a more detailed account, those who remain in Gambia and other African nations have no way of knowing the true fate of the loved ones lost to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The story of white cannibals is therefore an adult version of the toubob-as-monster myth Kunta is told as a child. It is a story based partly in fact, on the torture and degradation known to be inflicted by the slavers, and partly on imagination, as the elders try to conceive of a fate worse than what scouts like Omoro have already witnessed. In American literary tradition, a fear of cannibalism is often associated with a white anxiety over racial or ethnic acculturation.<sup>11</sup> Haley invokes this anxiety first among the West African people who have lived under the constant threat of kidnapping and enslavement, again aboard the slave ship that carries the protagonist to that “kingdom of white cannibals,” and finally during Kunta’s early experience of colonial slavery. As the Mandinka concept of Western slavery is repeatedly expressed as a threat of being eaten by slavers, Haley reverses the racial, ethnic, and cultural identifications that American literature narrated from the perspective of white protagonists traditionally associates with anxiety about cannibalism. To the newly enslaved, recently arrived “saltwater” bondsman, white slaveholders are the suspected cannibals, the feared other. Yet even in the absence of first-hand accounts, the cannibalism that the Mandinkas imagine of slaveholders, though not literal, provides an apt descriptor for slavery and the dynamic Orlando Patterson would later term “human parasitism.”<sup>12</sup>

As with his initial encounters, Kunta continues to be both offended and infuriated by other black slaves, whom he identifies as “my own people” but who fail to intercede on his behalf and “actually do the toubob’s dirty business for him” (*Roots*, 271). The discovery that his fellow

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<sup>11</sup> On the equation of cannibalism and loss of identity, see Samuel Otter, *Melville’s Anatomies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 334-342.

bondspeople eat pork further estranges Kunta from the other slaves, who “look like blacks” but whose violation of the Muslim dietary taboo renders them “all strangers—or traitors—to Allah” (*Roots*, 271). The phrasing of Kunta’s thoughts implies that he perceives an insurmountable otherness between himself and the larger slave population, similar to the rift that develops between Kunta and his Wolof shacklemate aboard the slave ship. The Wolof’s declaration, “If your Allah wills this, give me the devil!” shocks Kunta, who considers his faith “more precious... than life itself.” After that, Kunta feels he can have no camaraderie with a pagan (*Roots*, 222). The appellation “traitors” that Kunta applies to other bondspeople recalls the slavers’ black assistants who are despised by the captives and, generally, by the tribes of West Africa. If Kunta does not explicitly classify colonial black slaves with the *slatee*, his observance that they “look like blacks,” implies that somehow they are not, at least in terms of the Pan-African solidarity Kunta expects to find among those of his color. This sense of alienation gives way to frustration with a people Kunta characterizes as a “lost tribe” who have no knowledge or concern for their African origins, which for Kunta constitutes the very essence of identity. When, for example, Kunta means to compliment the plantation cook Bell by telling her that she has very Mandinka features, Bell responds “irately” as though she has just been insulted (*Roots*, 352). The account of Kunta’s early life as a Virginia slave conveys his disgust with “these strange black ones...who didn't seem to know or care who or what they were” (*Roots*, 273). Kunta is “sickened” to observe how readily black slaves submit to the will of white masters, and though he cannot “fathom what had happened to so destroy their minds,” he speculates that their servility is a result of having “been born in this place rather than in Africa” (*Roots*, 283-84).

Kunta’s distress over his fellow slaves’ loss of African heritage echoes Malcolm X’s commentary on the history of slavery. Prior to *Roots*, Alex Haley’s only book-length work was the as-told-to *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The collaboration grew out of an interview Haley conducted for *Playboy* magazine as part of the regular feature known as the “*Playboy* Interview,” which Haley helped

to establish. In his *Autobiography*, the Muslim minister and activist identifies the history of slavery as a central facet of his conversion to Islam and of his intellectual enlightenment. Early in the narrative, Malcolm X recalls how his seventh-grade textbook covered African American history in a single paragraph, while the class discussion consisted of a racist joke by the teacher. Later, as his younger brother visits him in a Massachusetts prison, Reginald Little tells Malcolm, “You don't even know who you are...the white devil has hidden it from you ...You don't even know your true family name, you wouldn't recognize your true language if you heard it.”<sup>13</sup> Reginald was one of several siblings who had recently converted to Islam. They hoped Malcolm would embrace their faith and reform from the criminal activities that led to his incarceration. Malcolm began to correspond with the Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, whose philosophy stuck a cord with the man who would become Malcolm X. He recalls, “The teaching of Mr. Muhammad stressed how history had been “whitened”—when white men had written history books, the black man simply had been left out.”<sup>14</sup> He described slavery as “human history’s greatest crime.” “The devil white man,” according to Malcolm X, “cut these black people off from all knowledge of their own kind, and cut them off from any knowledge of their own language, religion, and past culture, until the black man in America was the earth’s only race of people who had absolutely no knowledge of his true identity.”<sup>15</sup> From the prison’s vast library, Malcolm X studied books by Frederick Law Olmstead and Fannie Kimball, abolitionist pamphlets published by the Anti-Slavery Society of New England, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. “I never will forget how shocked I was when I began reading about slavery’s total horror,” Malcolm X recalls. His discoveries “made such an impact” that the history of slavery and its erasure of African identity became one of his “favorite

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<sup>13</sup> Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1st Ballantine Books ed. (New York: One World/Ballantine Books, 1992), 201,186.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 187-188.

subjects” as a minister.<sup>16</sup>

In *Roots*, Haley repeats much of the language of *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, particularly on the crimes of slavery, African Americans’ loss of identity, and the omissions of written history. With its focus on oral history both within the text and as the source for the multigenerational narrative, *Roots* seeks to reverse these omissions as Haley’s family story comes to represent the experience of millions of other black families in America. Once asked how much his work with Malcolm X had compelled his own ancestral search, Alex Haley downplayed the influence, but one need only read X’s comments in his *Autobiography* against the interior consciousness of the protagonist of *Roots* to recognize a correlation.<sup>17</sup> Kunta Kinte’s world view, his attitudes toward fellow slaves, and his regard of white masters, represents a novel assessment by a slave outsider who was not born into slavery; it also represents a 1960s view of slavery espoused by Malcolm X. In a passage that also embodies the book’s title, the devout Muslim Kunta Kinte, whose education included knowledge of his ancestors, resolves that “Allah had somehow, for some reason, *willed* him to be here in this place amid the lost tribe of a great black family that reached its roots back among the ancient forefathers; but unlike himself, these black ones in this place had no knowledge whatsoever of who they were and where

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>17</sup> Historian Peter H. Wood noted that “intriguing links exist between the two men [Haley and Malcolm X], and the two books, which will eventually demand careful exploration.” Peter H. Wood, “Roots of Victory, Roots of Defeat,” *New Republic*, March 12, 1977, 27, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (9625006). Literary scholar Leslie Fiedler likewise suggested that Kunta Kinte was based on Haley’s concept of Malcolm X. Noting the similarities, Fiedler wrote, “Like Malcolm X, the Moselm Kunta Kinte rejects his white Christian name; dreams of a return to Africa not just for himself but for all Black Americans; is an old-fashioned Sexist, believing that women should not be taught to read and that their place is in the Home; and an inverted Racist, convinced that all Whites not only invariably do evil to all Blacks, but that they have an offensive odor, and are properly classified not as human but as *toubob*, ‘devils’ who must be resisted unto death.” Leslie Fiedler, *The Inadvertent Epic: From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to Roots* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 80-81. After Haley’s death, journalist Philip Nobile explored Haley’s refusal to acknowledge Malcolm X’s influence; in a sidebar to a longer exposé Nobile wrote, “Haley’s denial of X’s influence on him is baffling. The mythic continuity of the African seed is the essence of *Roots*.” Nobile, “X and Haley – The Missing Chapters,” *The Village Voice*, February 23, 1993, 35, ProQuest Alt-Press Watch. Nobile also refers to an article that attributes to Malcolm X’s widow, Betty Shabazz, a claim that her husband directed Haley to seek out his African ancestors; Marshall Frady, Reflections, “The Children of Malcolm,” *The New Yorker*, 12, 1992, 78. Shabazz has been quoted as saying, “‘Roots’ was my husband’s word. He used to always say, ‘You have to understand the roots of the tree, you know, before you can understand the branches’;” quoted in “Alex Haley Died Today at Age 70,” anchored by Dan Rather, *CBS News Transcripts*, February 10, 1992, LexisNexis Academic.

they'd come from" (*Roots*, 290).

After his fourth failed runaway attempt ends with a foot amputation, Kunta is sold to his first owner's brother; Kunta recognizes that the living conditions of William Waller's slaves are better than those of the brother's bondspeople, but to Kunta, "they seemed to have no more realization than the others that they were a lost tribe." Kunta interprets the other slaves' compliance with the master's wishes as a lack of self-respect, which he also attributes to the bondspeople's disassociation from their African roots (*Roots*, 322). As Kunta observes the institution and the people it enslaves from the perspective of an outsider, his initial regard for his fellow bondspeople is disparaging to them. It is not entirely different from the demeaning stereotypes propagated by narratives like *Gone With the Wind*, of happy, docile, obedient slaves, but instead of invoking those stereotypes as a justification for slavery and master paternalism, Kunta Kinte despises his fellow slaves for their obedience. Only after years of acculturation does Kunta realize that slaves' conduct toward their masters is a deception that conceals the bondspeople's true desires. Even amid his frustration over slaves' lack of ancestral knowledge, Kunta's unusual perspective allows him to recognize semblances of Africa in American slave culture. Kunta recognizes remnants of Africa in the way bondspeople wear their hair and respect their elders, in the way mothers carry their babies, in the dental habits of the aged, and in his fellow bondspeople's "great love of singing and dancing" (*Roots*, 289).

As Kunta's loneliness eventually drives him to join the community of Waller slaves, he begins a friendship with the fiddler and a sometimes contentious acquaintance with his future wife Bell, the plantation cook who helps care for Kunta after his foot amputation. In an early attempt to engage Bell in conversation, Kunta prompts her to talk about what he considers her favorite subject, their master. Kunta learns that William Waller was once married to a woman Bell describes as "pretty as a hummin' bird" and "hardly no bigger'n one, neither." That, Bell explains, is why the mistress died giving birth to their first child, a baby girl, who also did not survive the labor. It was, says Bell, "the terriblest time I

guess anybody ever see 'roun' here. An massa ain't never been the same man since" (*Roots*, 350).

Bell's story also reveals part of Kunta's own history that he does not know. The slave catchers acted on their own accord, not his master's orders, when they chopped off half his foot. William Waller was motivated by a grief-driven compulsion to heal the sick and injured when he purchased Kunta from his brother. To Kunta, the conversation is startling, as "it had never occurred to him that even white folks could also have human sufferings, though their ways in general could never be forgiven" (*Roots*, 351). When William Waller settles into the role of doting uncle to his brother's only child, Bell speculates that he thinks of little Anne as the daughter he lost. As in their earlier conversation, that idea "hadn't occurred to Kunta, who still [finds] it difficult to think of toubob as actual human beings" (*Roots*, 371). Just as Haley inverts the traditional meaning of cannibalism, he reverses the common understanding that slavery dehumanizes bondspeople. Through Kunta Kinte, the author suggests that the very act of enslavement and the violence perpetrated against bondspeople is evidence of the slaveholder's inhumanity.

Twenty years after his enslavement, two important episodes signal Kunta's transformation in slavery and precipitate a crisis of identity. As Kunta drives Dr. Waller to make house calls, their route takes them past the slave auctions, where a woman apparently recognizes in Kunta the familiar features of a fellow African and begins "shrieking piteously." Kunta turns to see "the wide eyes of the Jola woman fixed on him...her mouth open in a scream, beseeching him to help her." Applying the buggy whip, Kunta urges the horses to speed away and resolves in the future to avoid the auction when he can (*Roots*, 386). His "bitter and flooding shame" suggests Kunta's enslavement has now reached a disturbing milestone. Where he was once the captive supplicating his fellow blacks for help, Kunta now ignores the woman's pleas because he is powerless to render aid.

In the same chapter, for the first time in twenty years, Kunta meets another African-born slave with whom he can speak his native language. Kunta encounters Boteng Bediako, from the Akan tribe of



Ghana, at the home of Waller's parents. Their first meeting, one of the most momentous events in Kunta's enslaved life, notably occurs at Thanksgiving. In U.S. culture, the holiday is associated with Pilgrim settlement and a national origin myth that obscures the displacement of Native Americans from their ancestral homelands. Two generations later, when Kunta's grandson George reports the policy of Indian Removal, an elderly slave named Uncle Pompey, declares, "Dat's what Indians gittin' for lettin' in white folks in dis country, in de firs' place." Pompey, who bears the same name given Boteng Bediako by his white owners, casts the Trail of Tears as the disastrous consequence of colonial settlement. He also speculates that the country's first inhabitants probably now wish that white colonists had never been allowed to come ashore (*Roots*, 690). As related earlier by the plantation cook, the house and inhabitants of Enfield, the site of Kunta's Thanksgiving encounter, emblemize the history of European colonization. Together, Kunta and the two Pompeys represent an alternate story of national origins, one of dislocation and forced migration for both African Americans and Native Americans.

After several months of anticipation, another trip to Enfield in the spring of 1788 affords the men a longer visit, which occasions Kunta's identity crisis. As Haley writes, "Kunta had been rocked to the core by his encounter with the Ghanaian, and that very fact made it clear to him how lost he had become" (*Roots*, 392). "Day by day, year by year," Kunta realizes, he had resisted less and accepted more "until finally, without even realizing it, he had forgotten who he was" (*Roots*, 392). Though memories of his homeland sustained him in the early days of his enslavement, he now rarely thinks of his family or village. Now that he has learned English, he realizes to his disgust, he not only speaks but thinks in the language of his enslavers. His visit with Boteng Bediako makes Kunta acutely aware of the gradual but, to him, contemptuous transformation by which "his Mandinka ways had slowly been replaced by those of the blacks he had been among." He also reprises old attitudes toward his fellow slaves whom he scorns for being "ignorant of themselves" and "knowing nothing of their ancestors, as

he had been taught from boyhood” (*Roots*, 393). Kunta mentally recites the ancestral names he learned as a boy and joyfully recalls the faces of friends and elders, until he realizes that the elders have probably died by now and his classmates have aged as he has (*Roots*, 393-394).

During this crisis, Kunta behaves with an aloofness that worries and then offends his fellow slaves. After a severe chiding by the fiddler, they ultimately reconcile as friends, and Kunta, acting on Bediako’s parting suggestion that he start a family, initiates a courtship with Bell. Kunta’s observance of African customs is sometimes a point of contention in their marriage, as when Kunta insists on performing the traditional naming ritual for their newborn daughter. After being excluded from the process of selecting a name, which in Mandinka tradition is strictly the father’s purview, Bell is hardly placated by Kunta’s explanation that the peculiar name he chooses, Kizzy, means “you stay put” (*Roots*, 442). Kunta hopes the appellation will prevent their child from being separated from them after Bell, now forty-three, confesses during labor that she was sold away from the two little girls she bore as a teenager. When little Kizzy repeats Mandinka words she has learned from her father, Bell is furious, knowing that teaching the child African customs will be considered subversive and could bring dire consequences upon the family. When an older Kizzy proudly shows Anne Waller the pebble gourd that Kunta uses to track his age, Anne’s father reports the incident to William, who summons Bell to explain what kind of “African voodoo” the rocks signify (*Roots*, 466). Kizzy’s baptism—performed as a condition of accompanying Anne to the Waller’s church—also highlights the couple’s cultural differences, as Kunta rushes out to rescue his child, whom he believes the minister intends to drown. Yet both spouses eventually reach a critical point of understanding about the other. Kunta’s comes early in their marriage, when Bell confides that she has considered running away. Kunta finally realizes that his fellow bondspeople, “felt—and hated—no less than he the oppressiveness under which they all lived” (*Roots*, 431). Much later, when Kunta nearly dies from a fever he contracts while driving Waller to treat patients, the fear of losing her husband brings Bell to the epiphany that “he was a man of

caliber of strength, and of character, that she had never known the equal of, and she loved him very dearly” (*Roots*, 521).

Kizzy’s friendship with Anne Waller demonstrates the competing claims of authority between the parents of slave children and their masters. Bell thinks Anne’s favor a benefit to her daughter; Kunta disapproves of Kizzy being made the pet of a white child. Anne’s whims for her younger playmate and William Waller’s willingness to indulge his niece interfere with Kizzy’s familial relationships. On her second birthday, Anne’s request for a sleepover and private party not only upsets the parents’ plans but essentially excludes them from their daughter’s celebration. William Waller’s promise to deliver Kizzy to his niece’s house for a visit at first infuriates Kunta, who resents being forced to share his daughter with the insufferable Missy Anne, but the buggy ride home affords Kunta an opportunity to spend time with his daughter and begin imparting knowledge of Africa that will be passed down through generations of their descendants.

## **Oral History as American History**

Though Alex Haley’s narrative credits Kunta’s storytelling as the source for much of the information that led him back to the village of Juffure, *Roots* is also attuned to other ways in which slaves gathered and shared information and how they engaged with major events in the nation’s history. One morning, Bell hurries to the garden to relay a vague report delivered by the local sheriff of fighting in the northern city of Boston. What has “white folks so mad,” Bell explains, are the taxes levied by the king “‘crost de big water” (*Roots*, 353). Later that evening, the buggy driver Luther, who has just returned with Waller from the county seat, offers a more complete account of the Boston Massacre and the death of a black man named Crispus Attucks. In the days that follow, Luther’s regular duties—driving Waller on medical rounds and back and forth to the county’s political hub—afford plenty of

opportunities to learn news of the nascent Revolution from other slaves, which Luther carries back to his fellow bondspeople at the Waller plantation. As the fiddler explains to Kunta, “White folks ain’t got no secrets” (*Roots*, 354). Very little of what masters do or say escapes the notice of their bondspeople. Slaves may go about their business as if they take no notice, but they are all the time remembering every word they overhear. Even when masters take the precaution of spelling out words, according to the fiddler, the house slaves are not long in repeating the conversation “letter for letter” to another slave who can spell and “piece together what was said” (*Roots*, 354). Among the fragments of information Luther reports is a growing anxiety, particularly in slaveholding communities, that the British government will offer freedom to slaves in exchange for fighting their masters. Their fear is realized when the royal governor of Virginia offers freedom to slaves who leave their masters and serve the British military. Bell, the plantation cook, learns of Lord Dunmore’s proclamation by listening to the dinner conversation of Waller and his guests. Demonstrating his distrust but also alerting his cook to the sensitive nature of the conversation, Waller directs Bell to “leave immediately” after serving, then closes and locks the door behind her. As though demonstrating the fiddler’s commentary on white folks’ secrets, Bell eavesdrops at the dining room keyhole. Amid fears of slave unrest, Waller reads a newspaper item to Bell and instructs her to share it with the other bondspeople. It warns of the suffering they will bring upon themselves if they rise against their masters. Though Waller intends the warning as a deterrent, the other slaves react just as Bell does, “less with fear than anger” (*Roots*, 358). Waller reprimands Bell for failing to return the newspaper before dinner, though he does not know that Bell has kept it to decipher reports of “actual or predicted slave revolts.” Later that evening, Waller sends Bell with news that the Virginia legislature has ordered “death without benefit of clergy” for any slave who conspires to “rebel or make insurrections” (*Roots*, 358). With the combined efforts of Bell’s newspaper reading and Luther’s intelligence gathering, the Waller slaves are equally well informed about George Washington’s appointment as general of the colonial army, the fact that he is a

slaveholder, and Patrick Henry's famous declaration, "Give me liberty or give me death!" Though Kunta approves of the sentiment, he can't comprehend how a white person can say it, since "white folks looked pretty free to him" (*Roots*, 356). Likewise, the Waller slaves hear news of the Quaker Anti-Slavery Society and virtually every major development of the American Revolution from the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the surrender of the British forces. Early in the war when Bell reports that Washington has refused black recruits but Northern free blacks have argued that they are "part of dis country an' wants to fight," the fiddler pronounces those free blacks "crazy" but predicts they will likely have their opportunity to fight as soon as enough white soldiers are killed (*Roots*, 357). When the black soldier Billy Flora becomes a folk hero to bondspeople, Haley emphasizes the role of black historical figures, even as the fiddler doubts that the interests of black people, enslaved or free, could lie with either the British or colonial forces. *Roots* also captures the contradiction that even as they wage the Revolution, slaveholders harbor a profound anxiety that slaves might in turn launch their own rebellion. Fears of a slave uprising that plague masters like Waller during the American Revolution come to fruition as U.S. slaveholders see their worst nightmare played out in the French colony of St. Domingue. Earlier novels like *Gone With the Wind* and *Absalom, Absalom!* depict the conflict in Haiti from the point of view of white slaveholders and essentially portray them as the victims of slave violence. In much the same way they receive news of the American Revolution, the Waller slaves of Virginia follow the developments of the Haitian Revolution with deep interest and sympathy for the slave rebels. Kunta especially admires the ex-slave general Toussaint, who probably reminds him of the Mandinka general Sundiata.

After replacing Luther as Waller's driver, Kunta becomes "the plantation's best-informed source of news and gossip from the outside"; even before the outbreak of violence, what Kunta learns as he accompanies Waller on medical rounds suggests that Haitian slaves are "suffering worse than here" (*Roots*, 381,449). Fatal beatings and live burials seem "commonplace," while Kunta considers some

punishments too terrible to repeat to his friends. These include the story of the man who was nailed to a wall and force fed his own severed ears, a white mistress who ordered her slaves' tongues cut out, and a child who was gagged so long, he or she eventually died of starvation. Ironically, the very tortures Kunta considers unspeakable would make the kind of information exchange that occurs among the Waller slaves impossible for their Haitian counterparts, since the violence also effectively renders them deaf and mute (*Roots*, 449). Kunta hears these "horror stories" for nine to ten months before he finally learns that enslaved blacks in Haiti have "risen in a wild bloody revolt," which hardly seems surprising in light of the earlier reports (*Roots*, 450). Kunta's observation that he has "never seen Spotsylvania toubob so angry and afraid" prompts the fiddler to recount an outbreak of violence that occurred in nearby Hanover County shortly after Kunta's arrival.

The slaves' conversations reveal not only their knowledge of current events, from the local to the international, but also their awareness of masters' anxiety that the revolt in Haiti could be repeated in the new republic. Reading newspapers discarded by her master, Bell relates the ratification of the Bill of Rights, which the papers report simultaneously with events in Haiti. That most of the news on Haiti has already been relayed through the grapevine telegraph suggests both the accuracy and efficiency of that method of news gathering. Just as they discussed the appointment of General Washington with the true rumor that he owned a large plantation with "plenty [of] slaves," the Waller slaves discuss the election of Thomas Jefferson and repeat the praise they have heard for him as a slave master. Their conversations highlight the paradox that leaders of the American Revolution were owners and—based on the fiddler's report of the Sally Hemmings affair—fathers of slaves (*Roots*, 357, 501-502).

Whether their duties carry them abroad or afford access to the news and gossip carried by the master's visitors, the labors of Haley's bondspeople make them part of a vast, informal network of

information exchange.<sup>18</sup> In this way, time and again, Haley's slaves learn the details of major slave revolts. When the Gabriel Prosser plot is uncovered, Waller insists that Kizzy taste his food before he ingests anything himself, apparently to ensure that Bell does not try to poison him. For all the years of Bell's enslaved service, this precaution, like the earlier attempt to keep the guests' dinner conversation confidential, acknowledges the slaveholder's fear that his own bondspeople could at any time turn the violence of the slave regime back on their master. Years later, when news of the Denmark Vesey revolt in Charleston reaches Alamance County, Kizzy's then-owner departs for a meeting of local white men with the threat that he will shoot any slave his wife observes outside of their cabins during his absence (*Roots*, 608). In these sections of the novel, similar methods of information sharing keep the slaves of Tom Lea informed of current events, though Kizzy's son, Chicken George, becomes the main source of news as he accompanies his master to gamecock fights around the region.

While Kunta's duties as the master's driver allow him to talk with other slaves and overhear the master's conversations, his friend the fiddler acquires much of his worldliness by providing the musical entertainment at planter soirees. Though it is unclear if the fiddler acquired his own skill by this method, he reports that many slave children develop their musical ability by "listening and observing" their white playmates' formal lessons (*Roots*, 373). What is clear is that music represents the fiddler's best hope of freedom. He is permitted to play at social events, just as other slaves are allowed to hire out their time. Fiddler saves his portion of the earnings to buy his freedom. After more than nine hundred engagements and thirty years of what he calls "fiddlin' to freedom," the fiddler earns the last of the \$700 Waller named as his price, but when the fiddler approaches his master to complete the sale, Waller changes the terms. Since their initial conversation, the cotton boom has driven up slave prices so much that a good money-making musician who would sell for at least \$2,500 elsewhere. Waller says he

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<sup>18</sup> Susan O'Donovan, "Trunk Lines, Land Lines, and Local Exchanges: Operationalizing the Grapevine Telegraph" (Lecture, Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, Yale University, New Haven, CT, December 2006).

can accept no less than \$1,500 from the fiddler—more than double the original price. Devastated, the fiddler flings his fiddle into a stream. Kunta retrieves the broken instrument, but Bell later repeats a report that the fiddler played at a dance, and the music was so sorrowful, it was nearly unrecognizable as his (*Roots*, 514, 517, 518).

## **Family History and Oral Tradition**

As much as Haley's slave characters know about current events, they do not have a direct role in major historical happenings until Kunta's great-grandson Tom, a blacksmith in the tradition of ancient Kinte men, is forced to service the Confederate cavalry.<sup>19</sup> Still, because of their proximity to guests' conversations and their intimacy with the masters' family, other slave cooks, like Bell, are important sources of information for Kunta. During visits to other Waller family estates, the slave cooks share a proud history for the Waller family, which Haley suggests as a point of comparison for Kunta Kinte and his descendants. At Enfield, the cook Hattie Mae tells Kunta proudly that the dwelling is the first Waller house in the United States and that only Wallers have resided there for the last hundred and fifty years (*Roots*, 368). The cook at Newport similarly shows Kunta the grave of the "original Colonel Waller," whose prayer book is displayed in the house with other family artifacts, including a coat of arms, a family seal, and a suit of armor (*Roots*, 369). While the cooks take pride in the legacy of the Waller family, they leave no reason to suspect that they know any more of their own lineage than the other slaves whom Kunta likens to a "lost tribe" (*Roots*, 370). While the slaveholding Wallers apparently can trace their ancestry to English nobility, the Kinte family lineage preserved by Kunta's descendants celebrates his African origins, even as it recounts a very different national

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<sup>19</sup> On the day of his oral examination that marks the completion of his schooling, ten-year-old Kunta Kinte is asked, "What was the profession of your forefathers...?" He replies that hundreds of years earlier in Mali, the Kinte men were blacksmiths and the women were potters and weavers. Haley, *Roots*, 111.



founding in the forced migration of slaves like Kunta, who becomes the celebrated figure in his family's oral history.

The tradition is passed on when Kunta tells his daughter about his youth in Gambia and when Kizzy, as a young mother, must find a way to answer her son's questions about his paternity. Rather than reveal that their master is George's biological father, Kizzy tells George all she knows of his African grandfather and all that Kunta taught her about Africa and their African heritage. Kizzy also passes on that oral history to her grandchildren and establishes an important family tradition. Each time a child is born, the clan gathers to retell the family story to the new baby. In this way, *Roots* celebrates and preserves the family heritage and the place of storytelling within it, even as the narrative also demonstrates how slavery degrades those traditions.

Shortly after being sold to Waller, Kunta begins to track his age with an African custom of dropping a pebble in a gourd during each new moon. When she grows old enough, Kizzy adds a new pebble each month. This important ritual, shared by father and daughter, is part of the African heritage Kunta relates to Kizzy. That tradition is repeated but defiled in the jar of coins kept by Kizzy, each one representing an instance of sexual assault. Haley represents Kizzy's physical experience of the first assault, but soon shifts the focus of the narrative to her son George, while Kizzy reverts to a minor role. As one reviewer aptly noted, Kizzy "figures significantly only as a vessel—first for Kunta's determination to perpetuate his African heritage and later for Tom Lea's sexual attacks."<sup>20</sup> Curiously, the psychological effects of Kizzy's sexual abuse are explored only briefly in the shame the young mother feels over her baby's light skin, which she considers a telltale sign of how he was conceived. A fuller consideration of the effects of Tom Lea's predation are represented through the memory of George as a young adult. Kizzy's accidental revelation of George's paternity sparks the memory of the

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<sup>20</sup> Dale Norton, "A Usable Past," *The Sewanee Review* 85, no.2 (Spring 1977): xliii-xliv, xlv, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27543212>.

jar and the realization that as a small child George was awake and aware of the sexual abuse as it happened. After each visit, Lea left a coin, which Kizzy dropped in the jar. Where her father's pebble gourd counted the months and years of Kunta's life, Kizzy's coin jar represents the number of times the master forces himself on her.

Haley depicts the emotional trauma through the memory of George, who is conceived from the abuse, rather than the consciousness of Kizzy who endures it. In doing so, Haley demonstrates the male orientation of the narrative. The realization that George was present during his mother's assault is compounded by another instance in which the Kunta family tradition is corrupted and degraded by the institution of bondage. Kunta and Kizzy's buggy rides were a time of parent-child bonding and an opportunity for Kizzy's instruction. Traveling to and from gamecock fights also finds George in the most familiar of conversations with his biological father, who does not acknowledge the kinship but offers to write George a traveling pass so that he can, as Lea crudely states it, "chase tail." In a further base attempt at solidarity, Lea encourages George to share details of his sexual liaisons by repeating what he claims to have heard about the promiscuity of black women. All the while, George is reminded of the sexual abuse his mother has endured from Lea.

Another important Mandinka tradition that slavery corrupts is the naming ceremony. *Roots* establishes the importance of this ritual in the early pages as Omoro chooses his father's middle name for Kunta, according to the Mandinka belief that a child will develop seven characteristics of the person for whom he is named (*Roots*, 4). Kunta conducts the ceremony knowing that "what a child was called would really influence the kind of person he or she became," but he is also aware that his daughter would be called by her master's surname, a fact Kunta finds "infuriating" (*Roots*, 437). The chapter concludes with an eerily poignant scene of the doctor recording the birth of "Kizzy Waller." With only a few strokes of the pen, he effaces Kizzy's family lineage, exerts his own mastery, and inscribes the child's slave status. Tom Lea co-opts the naming process by insisting that Kizzy's son be named

George, after another slave he knows. George, in turn, baffles his wife Matilda when he purposes that they name one of their sons Tom, after their owner. In all of these scenarios, the child is named by the biological father, but in slavery, the Mandinka custom is corrupted by the authority of the master, so that by the time George names his son, no one recalls the name's seven-characteristic significance, which fortunately does not bear out in the case of baby Tom. By his father's choice and the tradition of slaves taking their master's surnames, the younger Tom Lea (later Tom Murray, by virtue of his sale) is doubly named for the grandfather who entered the family lineage through sexual predation. The younger Tom becomes the most dependable, trustworthy, and ambitious of George and Matilda's children. He also succeeds George as the focus of the *Roots* narrative.

As Haley lingers on Kunta and his male descendants, his consideration of the women of his lineage is cursory at best. In the later chapters, Haley speeds through the youth, marriage, and motherhood of his grandmother Cynthia and mother Bertha in order to make himself the focus. Even if he was rushing to finish the book at that point, looming deadlines hardly account for Kizzy's truncated role. In Kizzy's early childhood, as Kunta disapproves of his daughter keeping company with Anne Waller, he broods over the fact that "Bell hadn't even respected his manhood and fatherhood enough to ask his feelings about his daughter playing with the daughter of the man who bought him...It seemed to him sometimes that Bell was less concerned about his feelings that she was about the massa's" (*Roots*, 443). This attitude, coupled with the choice given Kunta by the slave catchers between foot amputation and castration, advances a gendered argument about the effects of human bondage: Slavery is not just dehumanizing; it is emasculating. Haley acknowledges the sexual exploitation of slave women. As a multi-generational family chronicle, however, *Roots* remains primarily concerned with the experience of Kinte men, as though in honoring the family's African roots, the narrative also repeats the gender subordination it suggests in the Mandinka society of Kunta's youth.

Of the family's post-Civil War experience, Haley relates only two incidents that represent race

relations in the Reconstruction era. In North Carolina, a former Confederate officer repeatedly orders Tom to serve him a dipper of water, but Tom resists what amounts to a demand for racial subservience. Once the family moves to Tennessee, Tom is visited by two white riders who inform him that he can work as a blacksmith but cannot own his shop; he must work for a white employer. Though he considers relocating the family again, Tom resolves the problem by operating a mobile smithy out of his wagon. To this, he encounters no objection and builds a more successful business than if he had simply opened a storefront shop. When he eventually does open a permanent shop, he has made himself indispensable to the town and faces no further opposition. To whatever degree it accords with his great-grandfather's experience, the latter obstacle, so cleverly overcome, nevertheless offers an incomplete and misleading account of Reconstruction. Haley suggests nothing of the white supremacist violence committed by terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, while the hardships of African Americans seem to have ended with slavery. At this point, late in the book, Haley is more concerned with merging the historical narrative with his personal memories. Haley accelerates the narrative through births and marriages to arrive at the night his mother presents him, a six-week-old infant, to his grandparents.

The final three chapters take the form of a memoir about Haley's research and writing of *Roots*, beginning with his early childhood, when he learned the family story by listening to the conversations of his grandmother and other female relatives of her generation. In this final section, Haley affirms the factual basis for the preceding narrative and seemingly brings the family story full circle by returning to the birthplace of Kunta Kinte. Haley's memoir chapters recount names, locations, family events, and other facts that Haley says he learned as a child and verified in archival records through years of careful research. The climactic event occurs in the remote Gambian village of Juffure, where the recitation of a family oral history allowed Haley to identify the figure he describes elsewhere as the "the furthest back person" of his grandmother's stories, the man known as "The African." According to Haley's account

in *Roots*, this ancestor taught his daughter a few words of his native language that were passed down through the generations. Haley consulted with scholars who identified the phonetic sounds as belonging to the Mandinka language. Haley was then put in touch with a Gambian student studying in Hamilton College, who agreed to accompany Haley on a journey to his native country. The student, Ebou Manga, and his father assembled a group of Gambian government officials to whom Haley recited “the family narrative that had come down across the generations,” all the way back to Kizzy’s father, who “insisted to other slaves that his name was “Kintay” (*Roots*, 869). As it turned out, the Kintes were an old Gambian family. Haley was informed of “very old men, called *griots*...who were in effect living, walking archives of oral history” (*Roots*, 870). The Gambian officials promised to try to locate a *griot* versed in Kinte family history.

When he was notified that a *griot* had indeed been located, Haley traveled back to Gambia, to the village of Juffure. There, Keba Fofana recited the Kunte family history and genealogy that Haley incorporates into the early chapters of *Roots*. Haley describes what happened next as his “‘peak experience’— that which emotionally, nothing in your life ever transcends” (*Roots*, 876). After two hours of reciting Kinte ancestry, Haley recounts, the *griot* recalled an astonishing detail: one day, “about the time the King’s soldiers came,” the eldest of Omoro Kinte’s four sons, Kunta, “went away from his village to chop wood...and he was never seen again” (*Roots*, 876). For Haley, this detail echoed the story he had heard “all through my boyhood years on my grandma’s front porch ...of an African who always had insisted that his name was “Kin-tay” [...] and who had been kidnaped [sic] into slavery while not far from his village, chopping wood, to make himself a drum” (*Roots*, 876). The realization that the two stories matched and that Haley was descended from a member of the tribe lost to slave traders spurred an impromptu ceremony called the “laying on of hands” (*Roots*, 877). Haley writes that he was also taken to a Mosque, where the Juffure men prayed, “Praise be to Allah for one long lost from us whom Allah has returned” (*Roots*, 877). Upon returning home, Haley recalls, he

learned of the death of his eighty-three-year-old cousin, Georgia, the last of his grandmother's generation from whom he had heard the family story. According to Haley, when he told her of his intention to trace the origins of their African forbear, Cousin Georgia encouraged the plan with words that resembled the Mandinka belief in the supernatural presence of ancestors. "You go 'head, boy!" Cousin Georgia told him, "Yo' sweet grandma an' all of 'em—dey up dere watchin' you!" (*Roots*, 865). By the author's calculations, Cousin Georgia died within the hour of his walking into Juffure.

The remainder of Haley's research account in *Roots* focuses on his frantic search in London and Annapolis to document Kunta Kinte's transatlantic crossing. The griot's account included a time-fixing reference, "around the time the king's soldier came." Haley doesn't explain how or why but identifies this as a reference to the arrival of "Colonel O'Hare's forces" in 1767 to guard the British fort at James Island. From there, he identified a ship, the *Lord Ligonier*, that sailed from Gambia in July 1767 and arrived at the Port of Annapolis on September 29, 1767, with a cargo of slaves. Their sale was advertised in the October 1 edition of the *Maryland Gazette*. In contrast to the Bicentennial celebrations of *Roots*' publication year, September 29, 1967, found the author on the pier at Annapolis commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of the day his fourth-great-grandfather arrived as human cargo in the hold of a slave ship. Haley concludes *Roots* with "the hope that this story of our people can help alleviate the legacies of the fact that preponderantly the histories have been written by the winners" (*Roots*, 888). He gives the impression that he wants the act of reading his narrative to function as a kind of "peak experience" for his audience.

### ***Roots* on Television**

*Roots* the miniseries aired over eight consecutive nights from January 23 to January 30, 1977. Until then, miniseries were broadcast one night a week for the duration of the program. Several critics

interpreted the innovative scheduling as a sign of the network's confidence that the show would draw large audiences.<sup>21</sup> In reality, the ultimate success of *Roots* was anything but certain in the minds of ABC executives. *Roots* was a twelve-hour historical drama about slavery, told from the perspective of slaves. All of its villains were white, as were 90 percent of the television viewers.<sup>22</sup> The question of whether *Roots* could attract a white audience large enough to turn a profit influenced aspects of the show from scripting to casting to the seemingly bold scheduling strategy, which proved so successful that it became the new model for the miniseries format. ABC programming chief Fred Silverman devised the consecutive-night broadcast with the idea of minimizing the financial risk and, if ratings were low, recouping the loss during the sweeps period that began the following week.<sup>23</sup> Beyond all expectations, *Roots* was the top program each night it aired. Seven episodes earned a place among the top ten highest rated shows of all time (the first episode came in 13<sup>th</sup>). The two-hour finale became the most watched show in U.S. television history.<sup>24</sup> More than 36 million homes tuned into that final episode. Overall, an estimated 130 million people watched at least some portion of *Roots*, while an average of 80 million people watched simultaneously at any given time.<sup>25</sup>

Executive producer David Wolper believed the film's universal theme of family accounted for much of its success in the United States and in countries seemingly disconnected from the history of U.S. slavery or the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>26</sup> But as Sander Vanocur, of the *Washington Post*,

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<sup>21</sup> Sander Vanocur, "Roots': A New Reality," *The Washington Post*, January 19, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post; Les Brown, "ABC Took a Gamble with 'Roots' and is Hitting Paydirt," *New York Times*, January 28, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>22</sup> David L. Wolper and Quincy Troupe, *The Inside Story of TV's "Roots"* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), 44, 56-57.

<sup>23</sup> "The Struggle to Make Roots," The Legacy of Roots, Part Two, in *Roots the Complete Collection*.

<sup>24</sup> United Press International, "'Roots' Sets Record As Most Watched TV Program," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 3, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World.

<sup>25</sup> Total viewer approximation of 130 million based on ABC estimates reported to United Press International; Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *Inside Story of TV's Roots*, 148.

suggested in multiple syndicated columns devoted to the series, *Roots* was an event of national political import for the United States. “The introduction of slavery into this country” he asserted, “is the continuing central issue of our national existence.”<sup>27</sup> With news footage of the civil rights movement, television had shown the legacies of slavery; now with *Roots*, the country was confronting the institution itself, and not in the form of a documentary, but a drama that engaged the emotions.<sup>28</sup> Watching *Roots*, Vanocur wrote, left viewers with a “terrible and transcending anguish.”<sup>29</sup> Only a few times before had the country shared such a powerful emotional experience through the medium of television: “after the assassinations of the 1960s” and as “the clerk of the House Judiciary Committee polled its members on the first article of impeachment against Richard M. Nixon.”<sup>30</sup> His latter point centers on the capacity of television to create a common experience of viewership, but the comparisons are striking. The slayings of political and civil rights leaders and the prelude to the only presidential resignation in U.S. history were monumental events that altered the nation’s sense of itself, as did *Roots* when television dramatized, as never before, black Americans’ experience of enslavement.

*Roots* demonstrates the inherent violence of slavery and suggests the contradiction between human bondage and the principals of the Revolution that is already fomenting when Kunta Kinte arrives at Annapolis. *Roots* also depicts the commodification of bondspeople, a fact that would not have been widely known to viewers whose impressions of slavery were formed by films like *Gone With the Wind*. Like no earlier popular film or even Haley’s book, the miniseries casts slavery as dehumanization for profit. In highlighting the callousness of the economic motives, the film renders the slave trade all the more reprehensible. Most importantly, *Roots* depicts slaves, not as degrading one-

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<sup>27</sup> Sander Vanocur, “The ‘Roots’ Format: Fulfilling TV’s Promise,” *The Washington Post*, February 3, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Sander Vanocur, “*Roots*: A New Reality.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



dimensional caricatures, but as people—who suffered, survived, and resisted slavery; who had families and knew the anguish of being separated from them; who experienced joy, despair, and the pain of physical injury; who worked hard, ran away, forged friendships, and all the while nurtured the hope of freedom.

After watching the final episode with his family and a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*, Douglass Waddell, an African American resident of Los Angeles, remarked, “I think this is the second incident that has made white people take a look at black people. The first was Dr. King’s movement.”<sup>31</sup> *New York Times* editorial writer Roger Wilkins echoed the sentiment when he estimated that *Roots* “may have been the most significant civil rights event since the Selma-to-Montgomery march of 1965.” As Wilkins explained, “The essence of the racial struggle in America has not been physical, or legal, or even spiritual. It has been existential, about truth and falsehood, reality and illusion.” *Roots*, he argued, helped to revise white people’s views of black Americans as surely as the Montgomery bus boycott. “Just as Montgomery projected a vision of the ordinary Southern black as pious and determined, instead of stupid and indolent,” wrote Wilkins, “so did *Roots* portray slaves as substantially more intelligent and effective than the bumbling Sambos who have been passed along in story, song and psyche.”<sup>32</sup> Another struggle, Wilkins wrote, was to alter whites’ perceptions of themselves and the actions they viewed as “benign, commonplace, or defensible” but that blacks had experienced as “insensitive, unfair or cruel.” Here again, Wilkins argued, *Roots* had helped to counter “egregious misinformation about slavery.”<sup>33</sup>

Exactly how *Roots* accomplished that revision was the subject of analysis by William Greider,

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<sup>31</sup> Kathleen Hendrix, “Watching with an L.A. Family: Black Viewers’ Perspective,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>32</sup> Roger Wilkins, “The Black Ghosts of History,” The Editorial Notebook,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

of the *Washington Post*, who argued that the film relied on familiar images and mythologies. The first six episodes, Greider wrote, offered a series of white characters who might fulfill the role of the benevolent white—a figure whose origins he identified with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—but who in each case “became a creature of treachery, betraying friendship, inflicting random pain, tearing away Kunta Kinte’s heritage.” As a result, “any sensible white viewer identified with the familiar heroes—the black heroes.” Greider recognized Kunta Kinte’s birthplace as a “pristine Eden” while Kunta Kinte, speaking in “noble abstractions like courage and honor,” called to Greider’s mind “a mythical version of the Indian.” Most importantly, Kunta Kinte and his descendants embodied the qualities of “courage, honor, family, mercy,” that the audience identified as “the American virtues.” *Roots*, Greider argued, presented “the story of slaves struggling for freedom [as] the orthodox story of American values.”<sup>34</sup>

If there is a recurring theme in the varied response to the miniseries, it is that *Roots* was a source of pride for African Americans. Roger Wilkins recalled that as a child, he felt “overwhelming shame...because of the misinformation that washed over this culture.” *Roots*, particularly, the story of Kunta Kinte, Wilkins wrote, “filled blacks at all levels with great pride and chased the shame.”<sup>35</sup> The winner of the Philadelphia essay contest “What the Film *Roots* Meant to Me” recounted a similar experience. Bryan Stevenson recalled that on the rare occasion black Americans were discussed in history class, he felt “ashamed, and sorry for the history of my people.” The history depicted in *Roots*, Stevenson wrote, “has given me and others like me the pride that will someday, hopefully envelope the spirit of every black American.”<sup>36</sup> On the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Roots*, LeVar Burton, who played the young Kunta Kinte, recalled the film’s legacy: “In my own world, there was a real re-orientation

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<sup>34</sup> William Greider, “Shared Legacy: Why Whites Watched ‘Roots,’” *Washington Post*, February 3, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>35</sup> Roger Wilkins, “The Black Ghosts of History.”

<sup>36</sup> Bryan Stevenson, “Winning Entry of Recent ‘What the Film *Roots* Meant to Me’ Contest,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 30, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Philadelphia Tribune.

around this idea of having descended from slaves who were something before they were slaves, who were an organized people with a history and culture, a richness of culture and tradition.”<sup>37</sup>

If the appeal of the miniseries was indisputable, its artistic merit was less so. After attending an advance screening, Cecil Smith, of the *Los Angeles Times*, found the first two episodes, “so riveting a dramatic experience, so compelling a work of television,” he correctly predicted that viewers who saw them would be “hooked” and unable to miss the later installments.<sup>38</sup> After viewing the later episodes, Smith judged them “badly written and sketchily produced.” He wrote that the dialogue was “pedestrian,” the direction, “hurried,” the villains of Reconstruction mere “comic book cutouts,” and the Gambian scenes were inauthentic, he complained, because they were shot on a movie set in Savannah, Georgia.<sup>39</sup> Lance Morrow, in the issue of *Time* that featured *Roots* as its cover story, similarly complained that the film frequently had a “flattened, cartoon quality” that made “the whites nearly all villainous, the blacks uniformly heroic.”<sup>40</sup> In his column that coincided with the first episode, *Chicago Tribune* critic Gary Deeb pronounced the film “an almost vulgar trivialization” of the book, with a “woefully pretentious” script, “plodding” direction, characters who were “either totally noble or thoroughly despicable,” and he did not care for the cameo appearances by non-professional actors, like O.J. Simpson.<sup>41</sup> Stanley O. Williford, of the *Los Angeles Times*, also objected that with the film

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<sup>37</sup> Tim Clodfelter, “Deep: Actor had Little Idea Where *Roots* would Lead,” *Winston-Salem Journal* (Winston Salem, NC) January 17, 2002, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, “*Roots*: The Saga of an American Family.”

<sup>39</sup> Cecil Smith, “‘*Roots*’ Reaps Vast Harvest,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

<sup>40</sup> Lance Morrow, “Time Essay: Living with the ‘Peculiar Institution,’ February 14, 1977, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,914826,00.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Gary Deeb, “‘*Roots*’ TV Version Falls Prey to Big Bucks, Super Hype, and Prime Time,” Tempo TV & Radio, *Chicago Tribune*, January 24, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

adaptation, “Hollywood has produced pablum that greatly dilutes the book’s spirit and significance.”<sup>42</sup>

In translating the book to film, the script writers collapse or expand incidents from Haley’s narrative, create new characters, and invent storylines that do not appear in the book. Several of these changes might be explained by the fact that Alex Haley did not complete his manuscript until two months after the filmmakers had finished shooting the miniseries.<sup>43</sup> Haley forwarded chapters to the screen writers as he completed them, but some of the material that was later cut from the book had already found its way into the miniseries.<sup>44</sup> Even so, the film sometimes takes bizarre detours into far-fetched romantic subplots. A forbidden courtship, for instance, explains why Luther runs away and leaves a vacancy for Kunta to become his master’s driver. In the film, that same master, now named William Reynolds, dotes on his niece “just like she was his own” because she in fact is.<sup>45</sup> Ann’s paternity is confirmed by a lovers’ rendezvous in which Reynolds’s sister-in-law breathlessly recounts her dream of becoming “a darky” so that she would be uninhibited by her marriage and better able to accommodate William’s sexual demands.<sup>46</sup> Though it can hardly justify Mrs. Reynolds’s ludicrous fantasy of sexual slavery, Reynolds’s affair with his brother’s wife is repeated in slave gossip and is apparently introduced to illustrate the accuracy of slaves’ information networks and the fact that slaveholders have no secrets. Even one of Kunta’s runaway attempts, which are fewer in the film and protracted over several years, is motivated by his desire to find and escape to freedom with a fellow Mandinka who came to the British colonies on the same slave ship as Kunta. At other times, the screen

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<sup>42</sup> Stanley O. Williford, “History on TV Pulls Truth Out by the Roots,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

<sup>43</sup> David L. Wolper and David Fisher, *Producer: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 234.

<sup>44</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of TV’s Roots*, 48; Wolper and Fisher, *Producer: A Memoir*, 230.

<sup>45</sup> “Foolish Talk,” *Roots*, episode 3, chapter 17, directed by Marvin J. Chomsky in *Roots the Complete Collection* (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

<sup>46</sup> “Liaison in the Woods,” *Roots*, episode 3, chapter 16.

writers' inventions expand what received only cursory treatment in Haley's book. With an increased presence in the film, Kizzy becomes more than simply a conduit for the family oral history and the genetic line of Kinte men; however, the expansion of this important character occurs with the story of a courtship and an engagement that Kizzy ultimately breaks. The best of the miniseries inventions add new dimensions to the story of how one family experienced and endured their generations of enslavement. Most notably, the film elaborates the post-emancipation struggles of Kunta's descendants and illustrates the economic forces that underlie the international slave trade, slavery as a system of labor, and its successor, sharecropping.

After the early Gambian scenes depict Kunta's birth and the naming ritual that continues to be observed well into the *Roots* sequel, the film skips ahead fifteen years to 1765 Annapolis and the employment negotiations between Captain Thomas Davies and the owner of the *Lord Ligonier*, the ship that eventually carries Kunta Kinte back to the Maryland port as a slave. In a significant departure from the structure of Haley's book, the film alternates between scenes of Kunta's manhood training and the slave ship en route to Gambia until the two stories merge, fatefully, in Kunta's capture. This is not how the film was first imagined. "Originally," explained executive producer David Wolper, "*Roots* was to begin in the present day, with Alex Haley in search of his identity. Through flashbacks, the story of Kunta Kinte would be interspersed with Haley's relentless detective work."<sup>47</sup> After several months of revisions, Haley's search was taken out to make for a stronger and less convoluted script that focused on Kunta Kinte. Producer Stan Margulies later recalled, "The minute we dropped Alex...the thing took off."<sup>48</sup>

Unlike the novel, which recalls the capture after Kunta has already been secured in the ship's hold, the film offers a dramatic recreation of Kunta running for his life, then being trapped and

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<sup>47</sup> Wolper and Fisher, *Producer : A Memoir*, 229-230.

<sup>48</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of TV's Roots*, 49.

overtaken. The sequence concludes with a dramatic slow-motion shot of Kunta struggling against the chains that have been shackled to his wrists and feet. In the slave holding pens, Kunta recognizes Okiyu the Wrestler, the very instructor from Kunta's manhood training who lectured the youths on how to avoid white slavers. Though Juffure's champion wrestling team appears twice in Haley's book, the character Okiyu appears only in the film, as does Fanta. Kunta first encounters the Mandinka girl during an assignment for manhood training and meets her again as a fellow captive.<sup>49</sup> They survive the ocean crossing together, and when they are separated at auction, Kunta vows they will see each other again, a promise he fulfills nine years later.

Though the crew of the *Lord Ligonier* remain fairly anonymous in Haley's text, the film version of *Roots* expands their presence with two officers—Captain Davies, played by Edward Asner and his unscrupulous first mate Slater, played by Ralph Waite. One critic described the casting of actors like Asner, Waite, Robert Reed, and Lorne Greene in the roles of slaveholding villains as “a ritual sacrifice of pop heroes.”<sup>50</sup> Producers intentionally cast these stars, along with familiar black actors, as part of their strategy to attract white viewers.<sup>51</sup> Only college student LeVar Burton, who played the young Kunta Kinte, was unknown at the time. Davies, as he appears in the miniseries, was the creation of Alex Haley, who served as a consultant on the miniseries and described the character to the producers and senior writer.<sup>52</sup>

The invention of Davies, Slater, and the broker John Carrington casts a wider view of the

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<sup>49</sup> The character of Okiyu, played by Ji-Tu Cumbuka is credited as The Wrestler; he speaks his name once in the film as he rallies the other captives in the cargo hold. See “Roots: Complete Cast and Production Credits” in Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of TV's Roots*, 192; “One Village,” *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 26, directed by David Greene in *Roots the Complete Collection* (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2007), DVD. For first appearances of Okiyu and Fanta, see, “Types of Courage,” *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 10 and “Fanta and Kadi Touray,” *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 11.

<sup>50</sup> Morrow, “Time Essay: Living with the ‘Peculiar Institution.’”

<sup>51</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of TV's “Roots,”* 56.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

economic motives for the wholesale misery that Kunta and his fellow captives endure. Davies's obvious misgivings at carrying his first cargo of slaves only intensify as the ship sails closer and closer to the African coast. Davies recoils as his first mate reports the inventory of restraints and torture devices taken aboard in preparation for the slaving mission. In a later scene, the captain descends into the empty cargo hold, already outfitted with shackles and chains, to contemplate the atrocities about to be committed under his command. The toll of his troubled conscience becomes apparent as the devout sea captain, who formerly abstained from liquor, sits yards away from the slave pens and asks his first mate for another cask of rum. The request follows the men's discussion of how many captives will make a sufficient cargo, during which Slater explains the merits of "tight pack," where as many as two hundred slaves are packed in on their sides like spoons, versus "loose pack" which increases the chances that more will survive the voyage.<sup>53</sup>

If there is a villain in these early episodes it is Slater, who personifies the inhumanity of the slave trade. On his eighteenth slaving voyage, Slater is the expert on the management of human cargo, who schools the inexperienced captain in methods of packing and punishing slaves. He also educates an equally naive audience whose main impressions of slavery have been formed by films like *Gone With the Wind*. The continued influence of that film is evident from the all-time television viewing record it set the previous November—the same record shattered two months later by the *Roots* finale.<sup>54</sup> In his vulgarity, callousness, and concern for profit, Slater represents an ideology of slavery that shatters the myth of planter paternalism. During the inventory scene, when Davies appears particularly unnerved by the thumb screws, Slater asserts their utility, explaining, "If you're looking to punish a nigger, especially a young nigger bitch, that's one way of doing it without marring the skin and

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<sup>53</sup> "A Matter of Philosophy," *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 18.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, "ABC Took a Gamble With 'Roots' and Is Hitting Paydirt"; "Roots in America," *Boston Globe*, January 30, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Boston Globe.

knocking down the purchase price.” With an unflinching portrayal of the trader’s mentality, Slater’s obscenity, misogyny, and racism, are shocking, which they are meant to be. So is the afterthought that Slater states with jocularly: “a comely nigger bitch is rarely purchased for the way her thumbs look.”<sup>55</sup> After the *Lord Ligonier* has acquired its human cargo, Slater responds with characteristic crassness to the captain’s request to have the captives cleaned—“cleanliness is next to godliness;” he says, “it pays off in pounds shillings and pence.” He then has other crewmen douse the captives with buckets of what, given their open wounds and agonized screams, can only be ocean saltwater.<sup>56</sup> Later, the body of a man who has died in the hold is dragged by the ankles onto deck and thrown overboard. Slater’s concern is not for the loss of life but for the loss of profit. He states with annoyance, “there goes a hundred guineas to the sharks.”<sup>57</sup>

At first, Slater maintains an outward show of respect to his immediate superior, but Captain Davies’s lack of authority on the ship becomes increasingly apparent as Slater undermines not only the captain’s Christian morality but Davies’s ability to exert it or any other power over his crew. When he interrupts Davies’s visit to the cargo hold prior to reaching the coast, Slater tries to dispel his misgivings by appealing to the religious sensibility of the captain who prefers to “set sail on the Sabbath” because it “seems the Christian thing to do.” Slater reminds Davies that they will be exposing the captives to Christianity.<sup>58</sup> Only later, when the ship is underway with its cargo of slaves, does Slater discount religious morality. As the captain tries to forbid the crew’s sexual access to the female slaves on grounds that he is “a Christian man” who commands “a Christian ship” and “will not lead any man into sin,” Slater reminds the captain that he has never sailed a slave ship before. “You gotta give the

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<sup>55</sup> “The Christian Thing,” *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 7.

<sup>56</sup> “Taken on Deck,” *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 22.

<sup>57</sup> “Removing the Dead,” *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 24.

<sup>58</sup> “The Christian Thing,” *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 7”; “Doing Their Jobs,” *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 9.



men their ease when they're off duty," contends Slater, who adds, "It don't hurt the cargo none. Point of fact it's good for them."<sup>59</sup> Consistent with his earlier defense of the slave trade, Slater champions the crew's right to rape slave women as a leisure activity and argues, with astounding nonchalance, that sexual assault is actually beneficial to its victims. The captain, horrified, nods his assent, seats himself and begins to pray aloud but is interrupted by Slater, who advises that he "leave Christ's gospel to private prayer and meditation." Apparently to confirm the captain's resolve against taking a concubine, Slater asks, "You won't be wantin' a belly warmer then?" Ralph Waite delivers these lines as a man who exhibits not the slightest twinge of moral guilt, though the captain is visibly tortured by his conscience. In a subsequent scene, as the sickly captain writes to his wife that he regrets accepting the assignment, Slater enters his cabin declaring he has brought the captain "something for his chill," which turns out to be a female slave. Slater explains that he "just brought her as a belly warmer" and that he "didn't figure it'd be any problem for a highborn Christian white man" like the captain. With a tone of mockery, Slater seems to dare the captain to abandon his principles before leaving the two alone in the cabin. The woman wears an expression of absolute terror at the sexual assault she must believe is imminent. Davies rises from his chair with a countenance that makes the audience wonder whether he might actually attack her. He finally declares his disapproval of "fornication," a term that significantly understates the reality of sexual abuse. As the woman shrinks from him, Davies whispers "merciful heaven." The scene cuts away and leaves the rest to speculation.<sup>60</sup> Slater's conduct, particularly in light of Davies's earlier disapproval, represents a direct defiance and something of a command crisis in which the influence of a principled captain is eroded by a depraved subordinate and the commerce he personifies.

Among the slaves, the emerging sense of community that Haley's text conveys is condensed into

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<sup>59</sup> "The Ship's Hold," *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 21.

<sup>60</sup> "The Captain's Companion," *Roots*, episode 1, chapter 25.

the relationship between Kunta and his former instructor, Okiyu. In the film, Okiyu continues to mentor Kunta and serves as a composite character for the spiritual leaders and would-be rebels of the book. The first episode of the miniseries concludes on a hopeful note, as Kunta voices his fellow slaves' determination to kill their captors and survive their enslavement. They carry out the revolt early in Episode Two as Slater beats a member of the crew for harassing two female slaves, one of whom climbs the mast and jumps overboard, the other of whom is Fanta. Though Slater encourages the sexual abuse of slaves, he repeatedly strikes the sailor for allowing his debauchery to interfere with his duties, a negligence that ultimately costs the sale price of the woman who takes her own life. As Slater disciplines the crewman, the slaves, on deck to be exercised, take advantage of the distraction to initiate their short-lived revolt in which Okiyu and Slater are both killed.<sup>61</sup>

Gary Deeb of the *Chicago Tribune* reserved his harshest criticism for the slave ship scenes, which, he argued, "ought to be the most horrifying of *Roots*" but fail to convey, as the novel does, the psychological experience of the Middle Passage. "Rather than a gut-wrenching emotional impact," he wrote, "the ship sequence seems to dabble in blood, sadism, and soft-core nudity strictly for exploitation. We are properly apprised of the physical brutality of slavery, but we never get a handle on the psychological trauma."<sup>62</sup> Another critic, decrying complaints that the scenes were too graphic, declared that "slave ships were hell holes, and the scenes succeed in approximating that horror."<sup>63</sup> Anticipating criticism, producer Stan Margulies said that filmmakers were constantly asking themselves, "How much can an audience take?" as they tried to strike a balance between making a

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<sup>61</sup> "Removing the Dead," and "One Village," *Roots*, episode 1, chapters 24, 26; "Maiden No Longer," and "Revolt," *Roots*, episode 2, chapters 3-4, directed by David Greene and John Erman in *Roots the Complete Collection* (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

<sup>62</sup> Deeb, "'Roots' TV Version Falls Prey to Big Bucks, Super Hype, and Prime Time."

<sup>63</sup> Sander Vanocur, "Dramatic 'Roots' of America," *The Washington Post*, January 23, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

realistic film and one so graphic that no one would watch.<sup>64</sup> Whether it translated to the audience, film extras found a day in the cargo hold so upsetting that 80 percent did not return for another day of filming.<sup>65</sup>

As the ship drops anchor in Annapolis, John Carrington replaces Slater as the face of economic exploitation. The factor, who comes aboard to arrange the sale of the ship's human cargo, exhibits a refinement of speech, dress, and manner that identifies him with a different professional and social class than the now-dead first mate. What Slater and Carrington share in common are a fondness for wealth and a disregard for human suffering. Carrington asks whether the captain had a good voyage; Davies replies that his first officer, ten sailors, and the ship's boy—more than a third of his crew—are dead. Carrington offers condolences but insists the “the life blood of commerce is goods.” His real concern is the captain's cargo. Of 140 slaves loaded in Gambia, 98 are alive when the *Lord Ligonier* makes port; though the captain clearly thinks the casualty rate appalling, Carrington is impressed that the captain has completed the voyage with less than a third of his captives dead. “I have known slavers to make port with less than half surviving and still make a handsome profit,” says Carrington, who offers the captain “felicitations.” Davies refuses any more slaving missions, but Carrington extols the lucrative enterprise: “Thus does Heaven smile on us point to point in a golden triangle—tobacco, trade goods, slaves, tobacco, trade goods, and so on, ad infinitum. All profit sir, and none the loser for it.” The captain suggests that he and Carrington do harm to themselves by participating in the trade, but Carrington, oblivious to the moral implications, replies, “What harm can there be in prosperity, sir? What harm is a full purse, I'd like to know.” Davies doubts that either of them truly wants to know the full extent of the harm. Throughout the scene, when he does not speak, Carrington holds a lace-edged handkerchief over his mouth and nose to shield himself from the “natural effluvium” of a slave ship.

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<sup>64</sup> Smith, “‘Roots’: The Saga of an American Family.”

<sup>65</sup> Wolper and Fisher, *Producer: A Memoir*, 233.

Just as he refuses to see the captain's point, this gesture literalizes Carrington's unwillingness to breathe the moral stench of the profits he so worships.<sup>66</sup>

The following scene shows Carrington at the slave market, handkerchief in hand, as Kunta's wounds are painfully patched with tar. Carrington then talks with a printer to arrange advertising for the sale and grows agitated when the printer explains that politicians' competing demand for his services means he may not be able to deliver the handbills Carrington wants to circulate. The factor's response reveals a similar obtuseness about the contradiction between growing revolutionary sentiment and the enslavement of men, women, and children, which Carrington views as an unrelated matter. In a reference meant to conjure the mythic future declaration "Give me Liberty or Give me Death," Carrington tells the printer, "I am with Burgess Henry and the rest in my passion for liberty, but business, sir, is business." He promises to pay cash in advance for the handbills.<sup>67</sup>

The final episode, set in the post-Civil War era, similarly shows a connection between economic exploitation and terrorist violence. A cadre of dispossessed slaveholders and businessmen devise a plan to keep tenant farmers permanently in debt and oppressed in a system that resembles their former bondage in form, if not in fact. A nascent Ku Klux Klan initially destroys the crops of already struggling planters to force the sale of their property; a former senator and ally of the Klan plans to acquire all the cheap land he can buy so as to implement the new system of labor exploitation. When Sam Harvey comes to negotiate the sale of his plantation, Senator Justin offers his sympathies for the vandalism he has secretly incited, then prefaces his low offer with the familiar justification that "business is business."<sup>68</sup> Justin also gives Harvey his verbal assurance that he will forgive the tenants' seed debt but fails to do so. Their continued financial obligation tethers the tenants to his property until

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<sup>66</sup> "Not Interested," *Roots*, episode 2, chapter 5.

<sup>67</sup> "Business is Business" *Roots*, episode 2, chapter 6.

<sup>68</sup> "Pluses and Minuses," "Night Riders," and "New Owner," *Roots*, Episode 6 chapters 5, 7, 9.

the amount is paid in full, which will never happen, according to the sharecropping design. As the film depicts slavery's brutality and its efforts toward dehumanizing bondspeople, it also reveals the economic forces driving the slave trade and the labor system. In the contention between money and morality, time and again, white villains opt for wealth without ever calculating the cost to the enslaved in the loss of life, home, family, or self-determination.

While the miniseries protracts Kunta's runaway attempts over several years, it collapses the struggle to maintain his African identity into his refusal to accept the name chosen for him by John Reynolds.<sup>69</sup> In the film version of *Roots*, Kunta's friendship with Fiddler develops after Reynolds tasks Fiddler with turning Kunta into an obedient, English-speaking slave. While Reynolds's order formalizes Fiddler's tutelage of Kunta, it also binds their fates so that Fiddler's future comfort depends on Kunta's submission as a slave. The arrangement means that as Fiddler's charge, Kunta is initially spared the discipline of the overseer Ames, whose moral fiber is suggested by a scene in which a slave youth that Kunta initially mistakes for Fanta is escorted by her mother to Ames's cabin to become his concubine; Ames responds to Aurelia's obvious trepidation by ripping the girl's dress and snatching her inside.<sup>70</sup> Yet as the Reynolds family consider his refusal to accept the name Toby a measure both of Kunta's intelligence and of Fiddler's lack of success with his charge, it is Ames, a former indentured servant, who assesses the situation most astutely. "Slaves aren't born; they're made," he declares. Comparing his own indenture to the bondage of black slaves, Ames notes that at the end of seven years, he was free, whereas at the end of seven years, Reynolds's slaves will still be slaves. He also notes that if an indentured servant runs away, he is indistinguishable from any other Englishman, but if a black slave runs away, his color sets him apart from other colonists. Ames's comments and his personal background represent the shift from short-term indentured white labor to the lifelong enslavement of

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<sup>69</sup> "Taking Care of Property," *Roots*, episode 2, chapter 11.

<sup>70</sup> "Ames' Companion," *Roots*, episode 2, chapter 21.

blacks. He suggests the near impossibility of black slaves achieving class mobility like his rise from servant to overseer, and he signals the construction of a racial caste system that for the next two centuries would equate blackness with perpetual otherness. Ames's assertion that "slaves aren't born; they're made" suggests the volition of slavers like Slater, sellers like Carrington, buyers like Reynolds, and overseers like himself in imposing racialized bondage. Of Kunta's refusal to accept the name Toby, Ames tells his employers, "He knows his own name. It's the new name we gave him, he doesn't want to answer to; there's a difference."<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, the freeborn Kunta Kinte is determined to regain his freedom. One of Kunta's earliest conversations with Fiddler is to ask his friend to run away with him.<sup>72</sup> Though Fiddler argues that running away is futile and dangerous, he aids Kunta's escape attempts and pleads with Reynolds to intervene when Ames returns with the captured runaway, determined to make him answer to the name Toby. Reynolds proves indifferent to Fiddler's arguments and concludes that since Kunta ran away, Fiddler failed at his assignment of turning him into a well-behaved field hand.<sup>73</sup>

In arguably the most iconic scene of the film, Kunta is tied to a tree and lashed over and over as Ames insists that his name is Toby and that he will learn to answer to the name his master has given him. Each time Ames asks, "What is your name?" Kunta answers, "Kunta Kinte" and receives another lash. While Alex Haley's novel contains only a brief exchange in which the protagonist rejects the name Toby, the film's whipping borrows significantly from a similar scenario in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, where nine-year-old Jane refuses to answer to her slave name, Ticey. She is whipped for insisting that her master and mistress call her Jane, the name given to her by a Union

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<sup>71</sup> "A Doctor's Perspective," *Roots*, episode 2, chapter 17.

<sup>72</sup> "No Place to Run," *Roots*, episode 2, chapter 18.

<sup>73</sup> "The Sting of Failure" *Roots*, episode 2, chapter 24.

soldier.<sup>74</sup> In both cases, the assertion of a name is an act of resistance. For Jane, the new name represents her transition from slavery to freedom. For Kunta Kinte, it means relinquishing his African identity. For the freeborn Kunta to accept his master-given name—to become Toby—is to become a slave, not simply as a matter of law but in his sense of selfhood. Finally, after repeated lashing, when Ames asks, “What’s your name?” Kunta replies, “Toby,” and is instructed to repeat it louder so the other slaves can hear. “Toby,” he responds, gasping and barely conscious, “My name is Toby.” After Kunta is cut down, Fiddler removes the rope that binds the youth’s hands, props the young man’s head upon his lap, and holds a gourd of water to his lips to drink. His eyes brimming with tears, Fiddler soothes his friend, “Shh. Shhh...What you care what that white man call you? Make you say Toby? What you care? You know who you be. Kunta. That’s who you always be. Kunta Kinte. There gone be another day. You hear me? Gone be another day.”<sup>75</sup>

After the *Roots* finale, the Baltimore *African-American* reported the ratings record with the headline “‘Roots’ Crushes ‘Gone with the Wind.’”<sup>76</sup> The article referred to the fact that *Roots*’s viewership had surpassed that of the recent television broadcast of Selznick’s 1939 motion picture. As Fiddler’s assurance of “another day” calls to mind the closing scene of *Gone With the Wind* and Scarlett’s declaration, “tomorrow is another day,” the sequence that culminates in Kunta’s whipping, like the *Roots* miniseries as a whole, shattered slave stereotypes that *GWTW* proliferated in popular culture. Performances like Gossett’s, which earned one of nine Emmys for *Roots*, imbued the slave characters with a dignity and humanity that had rarely, if ever, been seen in portrayals of bondpeople on film.

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<sup>74</sup> Ernest J. Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971; repr., New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 8-9.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Joan Hanauer, United Press International, *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 5, 1977, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1715&dat=19770205&id=8bljAAAAIBAJ&sjid=sioMAAAAIBAJ&pg=1658,3378531>.

Fiddler's comments to Kunta also introduce the notion of dual identities and slave performativity. That concept is explored in the next episode, when Kunta, now nine years older and played by John Amos, assures Reynolds that he will be a good slave for his master, then mocks that performance to Fiddler. Kunta also confides his intention to attempt another escape. The scene reenacts much of their farewell nine years earlier, when Fiddler finds Kunta holding his just-broken chains and recognizes the necessity of his immediate departure. Just as before, Fiddler tries to dissuade Kunta and warns that if he runs away again, he won't be free; he'll be dead. "Then I'll be free," replies Kunta. Seeing his friend's determination, Fiddler tells Kunta that he is going to fiddle at the harvest festival as never before; what no one will know is that as he plays, Fiddler will really be celebrating the escape of Kunta, who plans to conceal himself in the last wagon leaving for market. As the two men embrace, scars from his whipping are visible on Kunta's bare back. True to his word, Fiddler plays lively at the festival but knowingly eyes the departure of the wagon in which Kunta has stowed away.<sup>77</sup>

In yet another made-for-tv plot twist, Kunta goes in search of Fanta, from whom he was separated at auction nine years earlier. He hopes the two will escape to freedom, perhaps even find a way to return to Gambia, but his expectations of reuniting with his fellow Mandinka are disappointed by Fanta's disassociation from her African past. Fanta now insists on being called Maggie and, in a reprisal of the identity politics of the whipping scene, corrects Kunta when he calls her by her Mandinka name. When Kunta speaks to her in their native language, the words are disconcerting to Maggie, who says she no longer understands and asks Kunta to "say it in plain English" and explains, "I put all that African talk clean out of my head."<sup>78</sup> Later, as Kunta implores her to leave with him and continues to call her Fanta, Maggie grows so agitated that she yells her resolution to stay where she is.

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<sup>77</sup> "Toby Be Good," "Escape Plan," and "Hidden Cargo" *Roots*, episode 3, chapters 2, 4, 5.

<sup>78</sup> "Nothing Left," *Roots*, episode 3, chapter 8.



To Kunta, that means staying a slave, to Maggie, it means staying alive.<sup>79</sup>

Their argument, which summons the patrollers and separates the pair for good, also contrasts Maggie and Fiddler's equation of escape and death with Kunta's understanding of death as an acceptable risk for freedom. When Kunta finally regains consciousness after his foot amputation and is told by Fiddler that he can't run away anymore, Kunta replies that if he can't find a way to run that he will "just lay here and die."<sup>80</sup> The implication, in light of their earlier conversation, is that slavery is a form of social, psychological, and spiritual death; if Kunta can't pursue his freedom by running away, then he prefers the freedom of physical death to life as a slave. By this logic, Kunta Kinte invokes the revolutionary declaration "Give me liberty or give me death," to equate his own struggle for freedom with the popular myth of the national founding. Kunta returns to this theme upon Fiddler's passing. In his final moments, Fiddler resolves that after a lifetime of playing for white audiences, he is going to play a song that he wants hear. After a few chords of the doleful melody, the music stops. In a poignant reprisal of the post-whipping scene, Kunta finds Fiddler slumped over in death and cradles his friend in his lap. As he begins to sob, Kunta says, "Now you know how it feel to be free, Fiddler...Ain't free a fine way to be?"<sup>81</sup>

The episode concludes with Kunta, now a husband and father, once again facing the choice between running or living life as a slave. In the film, the role of Kunta's fellow native African, Boteng Bediako is not to encourage marriage but to stress the importance of remembering his African heritage and passing that knowledge onto his children. Planning to flee north and enlist the aid of sympathetic abolitionists, he invites Kunta to accompany him. Bediako instructs Kunta to listen for the drum to announce the time for departure. Kunta hears the signal months later, just after completing Kizzy's

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<sup>79</sup> "She'll Stay" *Roots*, episode 3, chapter 9.

<sup>80</sup> "Can't Run No More," *Roots*, episode 3, chapter 11.

<sup>81</sup> "A Gain and a Loss," *Roots*, episode 3, chapter 23.

naming ceremony. The sound leads Bell on a frantic search for her husband, whom she probably fears has left with their child. When she finally locates Kunta, whom she always addresses as Toby, Bell insists that this is his home. He says angrily that no, this is not his home, but he intends to stay with his family. The episode ends with Kunta beginning to recite to baby Kizzy what will become the family story.

In Alex Haley's book, Kunta's kidnapping and, later, Kizzy's sale permanently sever each character's ties with their old home, family, and friends; but just as the film adaptation of *Roots* allows Kunta to find Fanta, it also devises a return for Kizzy to the Reynolds plantation eighteen years after her sale. In another storyline that appears exclusively in the miniseries, Kizzy becomes engaged to the driver of one of her owner's fellow gamers. Kizzy persuades Sam to drive her four hours one way to the Reynolds plantation to see her parents. Their late return so infuriates Sam's owner that he threatens to send Sam to the fields and cancel his purchase of the bride-to-be. The sight of her fiancé groveling to his master leads Kizzy to call off the marriage. Much like Kunta's earlier reunion with Fanta, Kizzy is disappointed by what she finds at the Reynolds plantation. All that remains of her parents is her father's grave. The slave who leads her to the burial site reports that Bell was sold to a slave trader and Kunta died two years before Kizzy's visit. On the night that he heard the signal drum but chose to stay with his family, Kunta told his infant daughter that her name meant "stay put" but would never mean "stay a slave." At his graveside, Kizzy promises her father that someday the family will be free. Then, in a poignant exercise of the literacy that led to her sale, Kizzy honors her father's African identity by crossing out the name Toby on the grave marker and writing "Kunta Kinte."<sup>82</sup>

The conclusion of the miniseries dramatizes Tom and his family's experiences in the first months of freedom. In Haley's book, Tom's self-assertion as a freeman occurs in an exchange with the former Confederate cavalry major Cates, who addresses Tom by racial epithet and demands a dipper

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<sup>82</sup> "Daughter's Promise," *Roots*, episode 4, chapter 20.

full of water. Tom obliges but, as he hands over the water, he tells Cates, “Things is changed now...The only reason I brought you this water is because I’d bring any thirsty man a drink, not because you hollered.” Determined to subordinate the newly free, Cates orders Tom to bring him another, but Tom merely drops the dipper and walks away (*Roots*, 829). This incident, along with the initial objection to Tom owning a blacksmith shop constitutes Haley’s account of the postwar era. By contrast, the miniseries devotes the final episode to the family’s struggles against sharecropping and white supremacist violence, both of which are embodied in Cates’s film counterpart, Evan Brent.

Based on the Cates incident, the miniseries develops a trope in which the cup of water stands as a symbol of black servitude. When Sam thoughtlessly tells Kizzy to “fetch” him something to drink, she accommodates him by dashing a cup of cold water in his face and telling him, “Never say fetch me.” If he asks for something, Kizzy says, she will be glad to give it, but, she tells Sam, “I’ve been slave enough in my life, without being slave to you.”<sup>83</sup> Though initially it demonstrates Kizzy’s insistence on gender equality in her relationship with Sam, the cup of water comes to stand for the racialized power structure of a slave society. In a later scene, Evan Brent, a shopkeeper and future Confederate officer summons Tom as “Nigger,” thrusts a cup at him, and demands Tom fill it at the water pump. Brent takes a sip, tosses out what’s left, and instructs George, whom he address as “slave,” to refill it for his brother, Jemmy. George, who has just traced his family after a long separation, corrects Brent and reveals his free status. In turn, Brent invokes the law that re-enslaves any free man who remains in the county more than sixty days.<sup>84</sup> In the postwar period of the film, Brent represents the reassertion of white supremacy as both the planation manager for the corrupt Senator Justin and the leader of the local white supremacist terrorist group.

As North Carolinians weep over Confederate surrender and plot the reinstatement of white

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<sup>83</sup> “‘I Lose Everybody,’” *Roots*, episode 4, chapter 17.

<sup>84</sup> “The Brents,” *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 15.

supremacy, former slaves respond to the news of freedom with disbelief and jubilation. Leading a town hall style discussion, Tom opens the meeting by evoking a familiar twentieth century oratory. “That’s right,” he declares, “We is free at last...We is free at last.” Tom articulates in part what that means: no more masters, never being whipped again, no more abuse of women. “Freedom sure tastes good, don’t it?” he queries. Then to the crowd, who answer in the affirmative, Tom, poses a more serious question in the same metaphor of bodily nourishment: “Well maybe it tastes good, but it sure ain’t gonna fill our bellies. How is we gonna feed our children?” His brother Virgil proposes that they leave in search of better opportunities. Lewis, likewise, voices his desire to “see some of the world” beyond Harvey’s plantation and the nearby town. “What’s the good of freedom,” Lewis argues, “if you can’t go nowhere?” For Lewis, freedom also means unrestricted mobility and the ability to travel according to one’s volition. Of course, he can go, Tom tells his brother, that is the “whole idea of freedom,” but Tom makes a case for building their new lives where they are and continuing to farm as they always have, only this time, he says, they will be working for themselves as well as the landowner. Ultimately, the family decides to stay so that Chicken George, who has been separated from his family by another long absence, will know where to find them when he fulfills his promise to return. They have no way of knowing that Justin and Brent will find new ways to rob their tenants—not only of their labor but of the basic option to leave—and thus negate “the whole idea of freedom.”<sup>85</sup>

A few days later, the night riders’ attack on the Harvey property disrupts the freedmen’s memorial service for President Lincoln. After the mourners spend the night fighting the fire set by Brent’s gang, Tom, for the third time, utters the phrase “free at last,” but this time with an irony that conveys the lack of freedom. With its evocation of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, *Roots* relates the freedom struggles of the 1860s to the twentieth century civil rights movement and the

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<sup>85</sup> “Staying Put,” *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 4, directed by Marvin J. Chomsky in *Roots the Complete Collection* (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

lived experience of the audience in the decades before the film aired.<sup>86</sup>

“You can't beat the law,” Fiddler once cautioned Kunta Kinte; Tom’s identification of the Klansmen tests whether Kunta’s descendants, as free men and women, can count on the law to administer justice. Though he acknowledges his duty to submit Tom’s evidence to Federal authorities, the local sheriff also tips off Brent and suggests he do something—the sheriff prefers not to know the details—to discourage Tom from pursuing the complaint.<sup>87</sup> While the legal system does not, in fact, protect their rights and interests, Tom and his family ultimately triumph over corruption, terrorism, and labor exploitation through an alliance with a poor white couple and a clever performativity that allows them to best their oppressors.

Prior to the appearance of George and Martha Johnson, an instance of genuine interracial friendship seems unlikely. Earlier in the series, when she feels her son naively overestimates his camaraderie with Tom Moore (Lea of the novel), Kizzy recounts the story of her ill-fated friendship with Anne Reynolds as a caution against trusting whites. As a teenager, Kizzy considers Anne “my best friend...the bestest friend I ever had,” while Anne addresses Kizzy as “my dearest friend” and plans to solidify their bond by having Kizzy made her legal property.<sup>88</sup> Though it is Anne who teaches Kizzy to read and write, she does not intervene when Kizzy is sold for forging a traveling pass. When Kizzy is out of earshot, Anne actually repudiates her for spoiling the plan to make Kizzy her slave.<sup>89</sup> Years later, when the two are old women, a carriage driver stops and asks Kizzy for a cup of water for his mistress, whom Kizzy recognizes as Anne. When Kizzy introduces herself, the elderly Anne claims, “I don’t recollect knowing any darky by the name of Kizzy.” Affirming Kizzy’s earlier assessment of the

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<sup>86</sup> “Where the Shoe Fits,” *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 8.

<sup>87</sup> “Seeing the Sheriff” and “Officer of the Law,” *Roots*, episode 6, chapters 12,14.

<sup>88</sup> “The Fuss Over Missy Anne,” and “Dearest Friends,” *Roots*, episode 4, chapters 3-4

<sup>89</sup> “Sold,” *Roots*, episode 4, chapter 11.

perils of friendship with whites and reprising the symbol of black subordination, Anne demands a second cup of water. Kizzy refills it but surreptitiously spits in the cup.<sup>90</sup>

Tom and his family's friendship with the Johnsons grows out of the shared experience of hunger. George Johnson first appears trying to steal food from the Confederate supply stores but flees when Tom interrupts the theft. The disturbance summons a group of Confederate soldiers, including the Brent brothers, who take Tom for the thief and beat him.<sup>91</sup> As his wife Irene and mother Mathilda bandage Tom's cracked ribs, the same youth appears at their cabin door asking for food. Over the meal Mathilda prepares for him, the young man explains that he and his wife worked a small plot of land in South Carolina and were dislocated by the fighting that ruined their crops. Tom recognizes the itinerant youth as the storehouse thief, which nearly causes Johnson to flee again. Tom calls him back in anger but relents and instructs Johnson to finish his plate, as Tom admits he, too, has known hunger in his time. Sure that he is now welcome, Johnson, whom the family dubs Ol' George to distinguish him from their absent patriarch, asks if they can spare enough food for his wife, who waits outside and surprises the family by greeting them with a respectful curtsy and the words, "Pleased to meet you."<sup>92</sup>

The Johnsons hail from a place mostly populated by poor whites. Their lack of indoctrination with racist ideologies and Tom's sympathy for the hungry make possible a sincere friendship between the poor white yeomen and the family of slaves. The friends' ability to feign the customs of racial cast is, however, crucial to their opposition to white supremacy. When he signs on to work for Sam Harvey, Johnson has no idea what an overseer does. He receives lessons from Tom and Lewis, who decide that having Johnson act the part of a plantation boss is preferable to Harvey hiring someone

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<sup>90</sup> "No Recollection," *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 13.

<sup>91</sup> "Thief in the Night," *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 10.

<sup>92</sup> "Ol' George," *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 20.

who knows how to do the job and “likes doing it.”<sup>93</sup> Handing him a tree branch to use as a makeshift whip, Tom instructs George to demonstrate how he would compel a slave to “fetch” a bucket of water. George thinks for a moment, tosses the whip aside and politely asks, “Excuse me, Lewis, y’all mind fetching me that bucket of water?” George’s respectful rephrasing of the term “fetch me” and his discarding of the whip suggests his larger rejection of the authority embodied in the words and the lash; it also incites laughter from Tom and Lewis, who then dramatize a more believable model of overseeing. Lewis acts the part of the slave with much the same mockery his great-grandfather Kunta achieved when he privately reenacted his false servility for Fiddler. Lewis’s parody and the entire role-playing exercise suggest a theatricality of everyday life under the slave regime. In this seemingly absurd exercise of two slaves training their overseer, Tom and Lewis’s satirical improvisation, coupled with George Johnson’s endearing naiveté, all demonstrate that the performance of these roles, far from being innate, is an affectation to be learned—an important point, given the enduring popularity of *Gone With the Wind*, which portrays childlike simplicity and servile devotion as a genuine characterization of bondspeople. When George declares he can’t bring himself to whip Lewis, Tom insists that he doesn’t want George to whip Lewis, either, but George must act as if he is capable of doing it. He reminds George that he is the overseer and Lewis the slave, a fact George must never forget. In George’s estimation, Tom is simply “teaching [him] to be mean,” but the performativity they practice eventually saves Tom’s life and makes possible the family exodus to Henning.<sup>94</sup> The true character of the relationship is articulated when Tom and his family gather to mourn with George and Martha by their baby’s grave. Tom delivers a brief but poignant eulogy in which he says that if they baby were like his

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<sup>93</sup> That estimation was reiterated by the rare reviewer who mentioned George at all. William Greider of the *Washington Post* judged George and Martha less than believable characters who provided “neat mirror image of that black stereotype from the old mythology - a helpless creature, good-hearted but none too bright, willing to learn, gushingly grateful for the good that is done for him.” While Greider offers important insights into the film as a whole, his assessment underestimates the significance of the character and his relationship to the enslaved Harveys. By William Greider, “Shared Legacy: Why Whites Watched ‘Roots,’” *Washington Post*, February 3, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>94</sup> “Overseer Training,” *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 21.

father, he would have grown to be “good man.” The others voice their agreement with a collective “Amen.” George reciprocates by telling the family, “You’s all are my friends. You’s the only friends I ever did know in all my life. You’s like my family.”<sup>95</sup>

The friendship contrasts starkly with Jimmy Brent’s feigned offer of conciliation. Earlier, when Tom is mistaken for the storehouse thief and restrained by other Confederates, it is Brent who lands repeated blows with the stated intent of breaking Tom’s ribs. Toward the end of the war, Jemmy Brent, now a Confederate deserter, appears at the smithy and pleads for Tom’s assistance. He gives Tom the key to his home and storehouse, where he has left civilian clothes, and instructs Tom to “fetch them for me.” Jemmy acknowledges that Tom has a right to be angry but argues that, “Trust has got to start somewhere, Tom. Let it be here and now. Let it be us that does it.” Tom goes reluctantly and returns to find Jemmy assaulting Irene.<sup>96</sup> During a fight that Jemmy initiates, he utters repeated death threats against Tom, who ends up drowning Jemmy in a water trough in self-defense.<sup>97</sup> As Evan Brent leads a cavalry search for his brother, his suspicion that Tom is somehow responsible for Jemmy’s disappearance and his warning that Tom hasn’t seen the last of him, foreshadow the surviving Brent’s terrorist activities.

Meanwhile, with the tenants assembled in the front yard, Senator Justin, the new plantation owner, assures the sharecroppers they will receive a “fair percentage” of the crops, though this is contrary to the plan of indebtedness he and his fellow landowners have devised. Tom tells the senator that the family likely will not stay if Evan Brent—now employed by Justin—is in charge. Justin, who now claims no knowledge of the verbal agreement he made with Sam Harvey to forgive the tenants’ seed debt, replies that they are free to leave as soon as their debt is paid. Brent asserts that the \$235

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<sup>95</sup> “Sad News at Home,” *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 23.

<sup>96</sup> “Jemmy Reappears,” *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 24.

<sup>97</sup> “To the Death,” *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 25.



they owe is not a large sum but warns that if anyone tries to leave before it is paid, the debtors will be thrown in jail.<sup>98</sup> The threat demonstrates Brent's manipulation of the law as he carries out a program of social and economic oppression through both legal and extralegal means. Under the cover of night and a white hood, as his fellow terrorists prepare to whip Tom for complaining to the sheriff, Brent tells the others to observe carefully the consequences of challenging his authority because, "You ain't never gonna leave here! Never!"<sup>99</sup>

As Justin and Brent object to a white man working as a "common field hand" alongside their black tenants, they hire George Johnson as overseer. On the night Brent has Tom whipped, George hesitates to challenge the six hooded riders, particularly after Lewis has questioned his loyalty. But in a reprisal of their earlier role-playing, George rushes out and declares to Brent— whom he apparently recognizes even in disguise— "You put me in charge here, and nobody whips my niggers but me." Instead of stopping the abuse, the argument only persuades Brent to let George perform the whipping, which the Klansmen watch until they are satisfied that George will carry out their work. As they ride away, a teary-eyed George continues to crack the whip but aims for the ground so that the sound can be heard by the departing riders. As all rush to cut down Tom, who is now unconscious, George prays, "Oh, God, let him be alive." Irene, who understands the deception, assures George that he has no reason to be sorry, since his quick thinking has saved her husband's life.<sup>100</sup> Recalling the earlier parallel scene between Fiddler and Kunta after Kunta's whipping, the Harveys and Johnsons solidify their friendship.

A reprisal of this performativity allows for the families' departure from North Carolina. Just as his their situation seems hopeless, Chicken George returns from his exile and devises an elaborate

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<sup>98</sup> "Indebted," *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 13.

<sup>99</sup> "Whiplash," *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 15.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

charade to make Justin and Brent believe they have succeeded in their campaign of intimidation.<sup>101</sup>

Irene pleads with the sheriff to return of the evidence Tom submitted with his complaint— a horseshoe chart that identifies the mounts of the night riders— and rips up the chart in front of him. When Brent repeats their earlier exchange and orders Tom to “fetch me a dipper of water,” Tom’s ready compliance suggests the reinstatement of white supremacy.<sup>102</sup> To test the authenticity of these developments, Justin and Brent ride out unannounced to the old Harvey place, where they find George Johnson in full overseer act.<sup>103</sup> Chicken George’s scheme culminates in an ambush, a counter maneuver by Brent, and a contingency plan that ends with Brent tied to a tree and terrified of the whipping he believes he is about to receive from Tom. Brent winces at the crack of the whip, but Tom offers a last minute reprieve by aiming for the dirt.<sup>104</sup> The scene suggests Tom’s rejection of further violence, but Chicken George tells the still-bound Brent that while he admires Tom’s thinking, if Brent ever bothers his family again, George will kill him. As he rides off with the wagon train, George Johnson adds further insult by thanking Brent for the six new mules he purchased under pretense of expanding the crop but which now allow for the Harveys’ and Johnsons’ exodus to Tennessee.<sup>105</sup> While this resolution is hardly representative of the unchecked terrorist violence of the Reconstruction years, it anticipates a similar tale of performativity and interracial friendship in Sherley Williams’s novel *Dessa Rose*.

If the Harveys’ departure from North Carolina constitutes their assertion of freedom, then reaching the property Chicken George has bought in Tennessee constitutes their arrival at the Promised

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<sup>101</sup> “Military Operation,” *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 18.

<sup>102</sup> “Justin’s Suspicious,” *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 19.

<sup>103</sup> “Surprise Visit,” *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 20.

<sup>104</sup> “The Other Side of the Lash,” *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 22.

<sup>105</sup> “Moving Out,” *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 23.

Land, which they commemorate with a recitation of the family story.<sup>106</sup> Kunta first tells baby Kizzy of his African heritage the night he decides to stay with his family instead of running away with Bediako. Chicken George recites the tale to his young children as he leaves for England to work off the gambling debt owed by his master. As the father departs a second time to preserve his free status, Tom finishes the narration his father starts by adding Chicken George as a character in the family legend.<sup>107</sup> In this final telling on the outskirts of Henning, Chicken George makes clear that Kunta's legacy is not only the story but the dream of freedom that has now been realized. Speaking directly to his grandfather, the aged Chicken George pronounces the family "free at last" and tells Kunta that he has, through his descendants, finally come to freedom.<sup>108</sup>

The film's coda includes a voice over by Alex Haley, summarizing the lineage down to his own birth. The scene of his great-grandparents unloading their wagons fades to family photographs and finally to Haley talking on camera. He casts himself as the seventh-generation descendant of Kunta Kinte and tells of his desire to know more of his family history; but of his search, Haley simply says that it took twelve years and that he recorded his findings in the book *Roots*.<sup>109</sup> His appearance authenticates the preceding narrative, but the focus of the miniseries remains the family story, not Alex Haley's search, which had been dropped from the early drafts of the script. Producer Stan Margulies and writer William Blinn later pondered how they could have written themselves into such a bind, as they did with the early scripts that featured Haley in a prominent role. "The answer," according to Margulies, "is that we were simply seduced by Haley."<sup>110</sup> Haley's quest ultimately made it onto

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<sup>106</sup> "New Home, Old Story," *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 24.

<sup>107</sup> "Kizzy's Story," *Roots*, episode 3, chapter 26; "Never Forget," *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 12; "Never Give Up," *Roots*, episode 5, chapter 17; "New Home, Old Story," *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 24.

<sup>108</sup> "Free at Last," *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 25.

<sup>109</sup> "Alex Haley Coda," *Roots*, episode 6, chapter 26.

television as the culmination of the 1979 sequel *Roots: The Next Generations*.<sup>111</sup> In the conclusion of that miniseries, Haley, played by James Earl Jones, travels to Juffure, hears the oral history recitation, and declares that he has found “The African,” Kunta Kinte. This is followed by an emotional embrace with a Kinte descendant, as the two men acknowledge their familial connection. Tom Shales, of the *Washington Post*, called the film’s denouement, “one of the greatest emotional crescendos in the history of television.”<sup>112</sup> By the time the sequel aired, however, multiple scandals had developed around *Roots* and Haley’s account of his research. If the story of Haley’s search for his ancestors “seduced” Blinn and Margulies into writing those early, convoluted scripts, then something similar happened with the reception of Haley’s book, and it would have a significant bearing on the long-term credibility of Alex Haley and *Roots*.

## Controversy

“The most remarkable passages of Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of An American Family* come at the very end,” wrote Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, of the *New York Times*. Here, the reviewer declared, “we are finally convinced that the dramatic family-chronicle Mr. Haley has told is not the novel it appears to be, but actual history.”<sup>113</sup> Though no other book about slavery had attempted the temporal scope of Haley’s work, it was not the multigenerational story but Haley’s account of tracing his ancestors that reviewers found most compelling. In the dozen years it took to research and write

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<sup>110</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *Inside Story of TV’s Roots*, 49.

<sup>111</sup> Alex Haley’s ancestral search concerns the second half of the series’ final episode. See Episode 7 Chapters 13-22, *Roots: The Next Generations* in *Roots the Complete Collection* (1978; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

<sup>112</sup> Tom Shales, “‘Roots II’: The Finale,” *The Washington Post*, February 24, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

<sup>113</sup> Christopher, Lehmann-Haupt, “Corroborating Evidence,” review of *Roots*, by Alex Haley, Books of the Times, *New York Times* October 14, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

*Roots*, Haley supported himself in part by lecturing about his search. The same basic account that Haley relates at the end of *Roots* also appeared in *Tuesday Magazine* (1965), the *New York Times* (1972), *American History Illustrated* (1974), *Reader's Digest* (1974), the *Chicago Tribune* (March 1976), and a month before the book was finally published, *Ebony* carried a condensed version of its final three chapters.<sup>114</sup> Haley's account in *Reader's Digest* also prefaced an abridged version of the novel that the magazine published in its May and June 1974 issues, almost a year-and-a-half before *Roots* was available in bookstores. Early in the project, Haley approached the magazine's editors for financial support; they agreed to provide a small living stipend and travel expenses and to purchase the condensation rights.<sup>115</sup> By the time *Roots* was published, Haley, partly of necessity, had spent years publicly reciting how he had identified the eighteenth century ancestor who had been kidnapped from Gambia—the man Haley describes as “the farthest back person” in the family story—and how he had returned to that ancestor's native village for an emotional family reunion. The anticipation Haley generated with his lectures and articles, along with the memoir that concludes *Roots*, ensured that Haley's ancestral research and discovery not only framed the book's initial reception but eclipsed the bulk of the narrative, so that reviewers like Phillip Whitten read *Roots* not as a novel of slavery but “the story of Alex Haley's search for his own ancestors.”<sup>116</sup> In his review, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt questioned whether it was even necessary to read the rest of the novel, though he finally allowed for the possibility that “perhaps the contrast of this semifiction to what follows it helps to heighten the shock

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<sup>114</sup> Alex Haley, “My Furthest-Back Person-‘the African,’” *New York Times*, July 16, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *New York Times*; Alex Haley, “Who, Where, Why? Am I?” *Chicago Tribune*, March 21, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Tribune*; “Roots: A Black American's Search for His Ancestral African,” *Ebony*, August 1976, 100-107, EBSCO MasterFILE Premier (48770342).

<sup>115</sup> “A Candid Conversation with the Author of the American Saga ‘Roots,’” Alex Haley, interview by Murray Fisher, in Alex Haley and Murray Fisher, *The Playboy Interviews* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 173.

<sup>116</sup> Phillip Whitten, “Mystery of 7 Lost Generations,” *Boston Globe*, October 10, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Boston Globe*.

of discovery when Mr. Haley finally confirms his family legend.”<sup>117</sup> His point remained, however, that the most notable section of the book came at the end, in the part of the story Haley had been telling for years, about his quest to verify the oral history and identify the man known as “The African.”

*Time* reviewer R.Z. Sheppard supposed that “Haley...may be the only black American to possess such precise details about his ancestry.”<sup>118</sup> “The odds were so against it,” agreed Robert C. Maynard, who reviewed the book for the *Washington Post*. Maynard was suspicious of Haley’s claims when he picked up the book, but he “put it down so overcome by the power of the narrative” that he began to ponder “how much it mattered whether every detail of Haley’s lineage had been precisely established.” Ultimately, Maynard was persuaded by Haley’s account but expressed concern that such a feat would give others false hope that they, too, could trace their ancestry back centuries to a person of African birth. “I kept wondering whether there are large numbers of black people in America today who feel they would like to trace their genealogy as Haley has,” Maynard wrote. “The reason that question disturbs me is the awareness of the pain so many people feel at the realization of how much of their past has been—and continues to be—robbed.” Haley’s story suggested the possibility of “a hero’s return.” “After centuries of indignity, brutality and inflicted ignorance,” Maynard wrote, “imagine the acclaim of the village of your ancestry. For all too many,” he feared, “that could become a potent and perhaps disabling tonic on which to dream.” In Maynard’s view, “Haley’s accomplishment is a far-fetched dream for practically all Afro-Americans. We are African villagers no more, but part of a unique formation in history, the Afro-American people.”<sup>119</sup>

Yet what Maynard cautioned as a “far-fetched dream,” was the very expectation Haley seemed

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<sup>117</sup> Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Corroborating Evidence.”

<sup>118</sup> R.Z. Sheppard, Books, “African Genesis,” *Time*, October, 18, 1976, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,946745,00.html>.

<sup>119</sup> Robert C. Maynard, “The Making of an American,” *The Washington Post*, September 26, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post.

to encourage. In *Roots*, after recounting his emotional hero's return to Juffure, Haley writes that virtually any African American with a little family knowledge could replicate his experience (*Roots*, 877-878). Robert Kirsch suggested that Haley's return was exactly what appealed so strongly to readers. By Kirsch's estimation, "We all share that moment when Haley reaches his ancestral place of Juffure and around him the wizened elders, the younger men, the mothers and the children all chanted the name: Meester Kinte! Meester Kinte!"<sup>120</sup>

In April 1977, Alex Haley returned to Juffure again, this time with film crews and several journalists.<sup>121</sup> In a dispatch to the *New York Times*, a member of the press entourage summarized the significance of Haley identifying Kunta Kinte as his African ancestor: "For the feat to be performed by a black American, living in a nation of immigrants as an outcast partly because he was deemed to have no link with the past, was nothing short of miraculous."<sup>122</sup> Footage of the trip appears in the 1978 documentary *Roots: One Year Later*. That program reinforced the factual basis of Haley's narrative, in part by juxtaposing scenes from *Roots* with real historical sites like the Waller plantation.<sup>123</sup> In one sequence, Alex Haley and LeVar Burton trek through overgrown woods in search of the cemetery where the Waller slave Toby would have been buried.<sup>124</sup>

As most early reviewers of *Roots* focused on Haley's "miraculous" discovery, critics seldom considered the book's earlier chapters. Literary scholar Arnold Rampersad wrote that Haley's book was

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<sup>120</sup> Robert Kirsch, "Alex Haley Cultivates His Family Tree among the Griots," *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

<sup>121</sup> John Darnton, "Haley Visit Captivates Village Where 'Roots' Began," *New York Times*, April 18, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times; Hans J. Massaquoi, "Alex Haley in Juffure," *Ebony* July 1977, 31-42, EBSCO MasterFILE Premier (48728048).

<sup>122</sup> John Darnton, "Kunta Kinte's Village in Gambia Takes 'Roots' Author to its Heart," *New York Times*, April 14, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times; "Visiting Where 'Roots' Began," *Chicago Tribune* April 17, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>123</sup> Wolper and Fisher, *Producer: A Memoir*, 238; "Roots: One Year Later," chapter 3, *The Legacy of Roots, Part One in Roots the Complete Collection* (1978; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

<sup>124</sup> "Roots: One Year Later," chapter 4.

“a work of extremely uneven texture but unquestionable final success.” In *Roots*, Rampersad found a “sense of circularity, of completeness, of integration of sensibility within the black American experience,” that he considered unmatched in either fiction or scholarship. From a technical standpoint, though, Rampersad found that *Roots* “seldom surpasses the standards of the most popular historical romance.”<sup>125</sup> On the question of genre, R.Z. Sheppard similarly noted that *Roots* “most closely resembles a historical novel, a form that Haley does not seem to have studied too carefully.”<sup>126</sup> In the *New York Review of Books*, historian Willie Lee Rose provided a rare, searching analysis of *Roots*’s effectiveness as both history and literature. “There are long sections in the book,” Rose predicted, “that will cause the historian to call *Roots* fiction, when literary critics may prefer to call it history rather than judge it as art.”<sup>127</sup> *Roots* contained “as much fiction as fact,” Rose asserted, but was not quite a historical novel, since its characters were based on actual people. She found Haley’s use of history lessons to demonstrate slave information networks “more distracting than informative” and judged that the author did not effectively illustrate change over time. She also identified several anachronisms, not the least of which was that Kunta Kinte is initially sent to work picking cotton, a task more suited to 1850 Alabama than eighteenth century colonial Virginia.<sup>128</sup> Haley’s Edenic depiction of Juffure and his account of Kunta’s kidnapping also presented problems. The real Juffure was not a “pastoral village” but a busy trading post in territory controlled by the king Nomi [sic], who profited from the English “slave ‘factory’” on nearby James Island by charging customs duties for travel on the Gambia River. In 1767, Rose explained, a “commercial trade war was brewing” between Nomi’s king and the English

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<sup>125</sup> Arnold Rampersad, Books Considered, review of *Roots*, by Alex Haley, *The New Republic*, December 4, 1976, 24, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (9598609).

<sup>126</sup> R.Z. Sheppard, “African Genesis.”

<sup>127</sup> Willie Lee Rose, “An American Family,” review of *Roots*, by Alex Haley, *The New York Review of Books*, November 11, 1976, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1976/nov/11/an-american-family/?insrc=toc>.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.



slave traders of James Island, who were loath to pay more customs fees to travel further up the Gambia River on slaving missions. “It is inconceivable at any time, but particularly under these circumstances,” concluded Rose, “that two white men should have dared to come ashore in the vicinity of Juffure to capture Kunta Kinte, even in the company of two Africans, as Haley describes it. The capture of Kunta, or indeed of any other subject of the king of Nomi...would have invited a terrible punishment” that, according to Rose, “would have been exacted indiscriminately on the crew of the next English ship that Ndanco Sono could lay his hands on.” <sup>129</sup>

In April 1977, as Haley returned to Juffure and the film version of *Roots* aired in Great Britain, Mark Ottaway, a reporter for *The Sunday Times* of London offered a similar account of eighteenth century Gambian politics that would have made the capture of a Juffure villager highly improbable. It was part of an extensive refutation that challenged what Ottaway identified as “the central tenet” of Haley’s book—“that for the first time a black American has actually succeeded in tracing his genealogy back to a specific African ancestor and to a specific African village.” This claim, which had been “presented as fact,” wrote Ottaway, “above all else accounts for the book’s phenomenal success.” But based on the findings of Ottaway and others after him, it seems highly unlikely that Kunta Kinte was aboard the *Lord Ligonier* when it docked in Annapolis and remains uncertain whether he existed at all.<sup>130</sup> In 1973, Gambian national archivist Bakary Sidibe wrote a letter to Alex Haley informing him that Keba Fofana, the man who supposedly confirmed Haley’s family story with Gambian oral tradition, had not actually trained as a griot. The letter, which Ottaway summarizes in his *Sunday Times* article, suggests that Fofana misspent his youth and abandoned training for his true hereditary position as a religious leader. Ottaway called him a person of “notorious unreliability” and reported the letter’s suggestion that Haley might have been “misled” [Ottaway’s word] about Fofana’s credentials because

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Mark Ottaway, “Tangled Roots,” *The Sunday Times* (London), April 10, 1977.

the Mandinka word “jaili” can either mean “drummer” which Fofana had been, or “griot,” which Fofana was not.<sup>131</sup> After the article was widely reported by U.S. newspapers, Sidibe gave a very different statement, insisting, “At no time have I ever expressed doubts about Fofana’s reliability to anybody, either in speech or in writing.” He did, however acknowledge a concern that a public backlash against *Roots* might damage the Gambian tourist industry, which had improved since the book’s publication.<sup>132</sup> Ottaway found other inconsistencies. Haley claimed that the storyteller could not have known in advance the details that allowed him to match his grandmother’s oral history with that told by Fofana. Fofana’s widow, Binte Kinte; his son; and the heads of both the Kinte family and village all confirmed to Ottaway that they knew in advance of Haley’s visit and the purpose for it. Ottaway suggests that rather than reciting an authentic family history, Fofana likely echoed back elements of the story that Haley himself had recited to the group of government officials who promised to seek a family history that matched Haley’s. Curiously, none of the Juffure villagers to whom Ottaway spoke could recall the name of any ancestor kidnapped by slavers “except miraculously that of Kunta Kinte.”<sup>133</sup>

Ottaway also interrogated Haley’s dating of the kidnapping to 1767, which the author based on Fofana’s vague detail that the kidnapping occurred “around the time the King’s soldiers came.” Haley, without explanation, determined that this was a reference to the arrival of British forces commanded by Colonel O’Hare in 1767. Highlighting another example of Haley’s inexactitude, Ottaway notes that the forces in question were commanded by Colonel O’Hara and arrived in 1766. More importantly, the British were allowed to trade at the pleasure of the King of Barra, on the condition that none of his

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> “British Writer Misquoted Source for Roots Article,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 4, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Philadelphia Tribune; Ray Snoddy, “‘Roots’ Debunker Disputed by Gambian,” *The Washington Post* ProQuest Historical Newspapers, April 22, 1977.

<sup>133</sup> Ottaway, “Tangled Roots.”

people would be kidnapped. In 1768, writes Ottaway, the king besieged the British outpost at James Island and cut off their water supply over the fact that one of the king's subjects had been taken as a translator on a slave ship three years earlier and had not been returned. The lack of incident in the supposed year of Kunta Kinte's kidnapping led Ottaway to consider the date highly suspect. Ottaway concludes that Haley simply chose the date 1767 because it fit with his American research. Four days after Ottaway's article appeared, the *New York Times* published a partial translation of the Kunta Kinte story Fofana provided the Gambian National Archive and which Ottaway cites in his article. In that version, Fofana adds a detail that Haley does not mention in *Roots*: Kunta Kinte was held for seven years after his capture before he was taken to America and was twenty-three years old at the time of his arrival in Annapolis.<sup>134</sup>

"It would be a scoop to beat all hell if *Roots* could be proved to be a hoax," Alex Haley told the *New York Times* in response, "and that's one of the reasons why it was so important to me to document as best I could."<sup>135</sup> Responding to Ottaway's charge that he had failed to prove Kunta Kinte as his ancestor, Haley explained, "It was like somebody walked up to you and said your dead father had not actually been your father...It so confused me at first, I was without words. ...Then I got angry...Can't we blacks have one case where we are able to go back to our past without someone taking a cheap shot to torpedo it?"<sup>136</sup> When Ottaway's article appeared, Haley was en route to England as a stopover on his way to Juffure. He told reporters he was eager to debate Ottaway.<sup>137</sup> In a letter to the *New York Times*

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<sup>134</sup> "Text of Deposition on Kunta Kinte," *New York Times* April 14, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>135</sup> C. Gerald Fraser, "Haley is Hoping to Debate Reporter," *New York Times*, April 10, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>136</sup> John Darnton, "Haley, Assailing Critic, Says 'Roots' is Sound," *New York Times*, April 19, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>137</sup> "'Roots' Author is Eager to Debate Critic," *Chicago Tribune*, April 11, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

in September 1977, Ottaway said he had “accepted the challenge” but that Haley had “then backed down.” According to Ottaway, Haley also requested an opportunity to respond to the allegations in the *Sunday Times*; the editor agreed, but after five months Haley had still not submitted a rebuttal and apparently never did.<sup>138</sup>

When he returned from Gambia in April 1977, Haley learned that he had been awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *Roots*. Like the National Book Award, this Pulitzer was a “special” prize. For the most part, *Roots* read like a novel, and much of the narrative, Haley admitted, was the product of the writer’s imagination. But the last three memoir chapters, Haley’s identification of Kunta Kinte, and his claim that all of the genealogical connections were true to the best of his knowledge, made *Roots* seem something more than fiction. One reviewer called it a “hybrid work.”<sup>139</sup> Haley called it “faction.”<sup>140</sup> When *Roots* was awarded some of the country’s most prestigious literary honors, the prize committees determined that *Roots* did not fit any of their existing categories.<sup>141</sup>

Marketing campaigns may have contributed, at least in part, to the confusion. Early ads for the novel touted Haley’s “genealogical detective work” and declared his findings “unique,” meaning one of a kind, “in American publishing and in American history.”<sup>142</sup> Some even referred to the book as an autobiography and hailed it as the “first book ever to trace a Black American family back seven

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<sup>138</sup> Mark Ottaway, “*Roots* Criticism Awaiting a Rebuttal,” letter to the editor, *New York Times*, September 25, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>139</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *Books Considered*, review of *Roots*, by Alex Haley, 23.

<sup>140</sup> Haley and Fisher, “A Candid Conversation with the Author of the American Saga ‘Roots,’” 431.

<sup>141</sup> “‘Roots’ in Special Class,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 28, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; “‘Roots’ Fails to Qualify for Book Awards Contest,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times; “Haley’s ‘Roots’ in a Class by itself,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times; Christopher Dickey, “Book Award Nominees,” *The Washington Post*, March 28, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Washington Post; Deirdre Carmody, “Haley Gets Special Pulitzer Prize; Lufkin, Tex., News Takes a Medal,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>142</sup> “Display Ad 215— no Title,” *New York Times*, September 24, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

generations.”<sup>143</sup> An ad for a public appearance by Haley referred to the miniseries as a “TV documentary”<sup>144</sup> One ad, which appeared half way through the eight-day television broadcast, showed Haley posing for a “family portrait” with his supposed sixth cousins in Juffure and summarized the research account that concludes the text of Haley’s book.<sup>145</sup> Advertisements not for *Roots* itself but for the issue of *Playboy* that contained an interview with Alex Haley referred to his bestseller as a “historical novel,” but this label, suggesting *Roots* primarily as a work of fiction, was unusual. Publicity for the various versions of *Roots* tended to emphasize the nonfiction elements of Haley’s work and the extraordinary feat of identifying Kunta Kinte as his enslaved ancestor.<sup>146</sup> Thus, the elements of Haley’s narrative that propelled the story’s popularity, at least early on, also lent a factual legitimacy to elements of the book that otherwise might have been received as historical fiction.

After Ottaway’s *Sunday Times* article, critics and editorialists began to debate whether it really mattered if Haley had truly traced his ancestry. A *Boston Globe* editorial asserted that the problem of sources, “should not detract from the book’s important contribution to our understanding of black history” because in depicting the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in America, the book had represented a “much broader and well-documented truth.”<sup>147</sup> Several academic historians considered *Roots* undiminished by Ottaway’s findings. In a way that most critics outside of academia did not, these historians understood *Roots* as a novel and did not hold it to the same standards of factual accuracy that

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<sup>143</sup> “Display Ad 45— no Title,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, November 20, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Philadelphia Tribune; “Display Ad 9— no Title,” *Atlanta Daily World*, January 30, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World.

<sup>144</sup> “Display Ad 24— no Title,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

<sup>145</sup> “Display Ad 181— no Title,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>146</sup> “Display Ad 70— no Title,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times; “Display Ad 21— no Title,” *Boston Globe*, December 14, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Boston Globe.

<sup>147</sup> “The Roots of ‘Roots,’” *Boston Globe*, April 12, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Boston Globe.

they applied to their profession.<sup>148</sup> Bernard Bailyn described *Roots* as a “work of fiction,” and Haley’s “perception of the meaning of slavery.” Robert Fogel praised it as “the best historical novel ever written on slavery.”<sup>149</sup> Edmund Morgan understood *Roots* as “a statement of someone’s search for an identity,” and David Davis noted the effect of *Roots* in revising the popular understanding of slavery.<sup>150</sup> Robert Engs, of the University of Pennsylvania, said, “The success of the book was in its ability to portray the characters as human beings,” and in creating characters with whom readers, black and white, could identify. Emma Jones Lapansky, of Temple, saw it as a “1970s view of how Americans are prepared to think about slavery.”<sup>151</sup> Arguing that the factual errors should not devalue the book, columnist Ellen Goodman feared that the attempt to discredit *Roots* would allow the public to ignore the terrible past it depicted. If Haley’s book were proven a fraud, Goodman worried, then, “perhaps we can comfortably close our eyes to the most vivid picture of slavery written in our lifetimes.”<sup>152</sup>

Walter Goodman, of the *New York Times*, wrote, “Whatever the factual failings of Mr. Haley’s work, he has made an inestimable contribution to racial understanding in this country.” But Goodman also went on to say that phrases like “symbolic truth” and “essential truth” invoked to explain the significance of *Roots* were generally applied to fiction. Yet *Roots*, he observed, “was offered to the public as something else—as one man’s diligently researched and successful effort to trace his

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<sup>148</sup> Robert Fogel told *New York Times* reporter Israel Shenker, “I never applied to it the standards I would have if it had been written by C. Vann Woodward or Oscar Handlin. Oscar Handlin replied, “A fraud’s a fraud,” but he was apparently speaking generally, as he did not know the specific details of Ottaway’s allegations. The *New York Times* article in which several historians are quoted was published on the same date that Ottaway’s article ran in the *Sunday Times*. Therefore, the extent to which the historians had an opportunity to review Ottaway’s allegations is unclear. Israel Shenker, “Some Historians Dismiss Report of Factual Mistakes in ‘Roots,’” *New York Times*, April 10, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Times.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> “Educators Defend ‘Roots,’” (Baltimore) *Afro-American* April 23, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Afro-American.

<sup>152</sup> Ellen Goodman, “Haley Never Insisted He Wrote Pure History,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

ancestry.... If it had been presented as [as fiction or a historical novel] from the beginning, there would be no dispute now.” Goodman also noted that *Roots* topped the bestseller lists in the category of nonfiction.<sup>153</sup>

It also appeared that whatever Keba Fofana’s credentials, griots were not the archives of oral history that Haley had portrayed for his readers. Kent Rasmussen, a scholar of African history, prefaced his analysis by saying that Haley’s claim of having “traced his genealogy back to a specific African ancestor,” while being the most “novel” feature of *Roots*, was not its most “significant.” “No other black American has ever made such a claim,” Rasmussen wrote, “and there is little doubt that, initially, it had much to do with the book’s enormous appeal, which began building long before its publication.” Rasmussen praised *Roots* for transforming popular perceptions about the enslaved. “If nothing else,” he wrote, “Haley’s work has demonstrated to millions of contemporary Americans that ‘the slaves’ were actually thinking, dreaming, feeling human beings, whose descendants are the inheritors of a proud legacy of hope and endurance.” Then, he went on to highlight Haley’s missteps in failing to properly interrogate Fofana’s oral account, a source scholars generally view with a high degree of skepticism.

Haley’s reverence for griots—in the memoir chapters but especially in the narrative proper—transforms these storytellers into almost supernatural beings. As villagers gather to listen to stories, a “quick hush” falls over the crowd (*Roots*, 49). Sons of griots, born to the hereditary position, have a “solemn duty” to become griots “so that the events of the distant past would live forever” (*Roots*, 133-34). At the end of their lives, griots are not buried like most men but interred “within the shells of ancient baobabs, since both the trees and the histories in the heads of griots [are] timeless” (*Roots*, 172). Even in these early chapters of *Roots*, Haley primes his audience for the ultimate climactic moment when Keba Fofana’s oral history merges with the one told by Grandma Cynthia, Aunt Liz, and Cousin Georgia, “who had been griots in their own ways” (*Roots*, 883). In reality, griots are paid

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<sup>153</sup> Walter Goodman, “Fact, Faction or Symbol?,” The Editorial Notebook, *New York Times*, April 15, 1977, 21.

storytellers, who often customize their narratives to flatter or please their patrons. An experienced researcher, Kent Rasmussen explained, would have inquired how much Fofana had been told about the reasons for Haley's visit and determined how much his account had been influenced by outside information. Something else troubled Rasmussen about the story of Kunta Kinte. "The living perpetuate such histories to keep alive memories of their ancestors," he wrote. Since Kunta Kinte left no children, it "strains credibility" that his disappearance would have been remembered in the oral tradition. People who were kidnapped by slavers, Rasmussen supposes, were "probably forgotten by the people left behind."<sup>154</sup> Indeed, Mark Ottaway found that to be precisely the case, with the lone exception of Kunta Kinte.

Though Keba Fofana's death only a few months after the publication of *Roots* made it impossible to further interrogate his oral account, historian Donald Wright interviewed Fofana two years earlier. Wright's assessment of that interview, compared with nearly a hundred others he conducted during his field research, remains the most important gauge of Keba Fofana's reliability as a source of oral history. In 1974, Wright spent eight months in The Gambia collecting oral traditions for his dissertation on the history of Niumi, the precolonial Mandinka state where Juffure was located. Wright had met Haley and read a published account of his ancestral search. Though he was incredulous about Haley's claims, Wright was so intrigued by Haley's story that he made a point of interviewing Fofana shortly after his arrival in The Gambia.<sup>155</sup> Wright's inquiries into his informant's background revealed that Fofana was not a griot by birth or training. His hereditary position was that of the village Iman, an Islamic religious leader; but after devoting much of his youth to drumming and dancing, rather than to his religious studies, Fofana, by middle age, was qualified "for little else than to become

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<sup>154</sup> Kent Rasmussen, "'Roots' – a Growing Thicket of Controversy: Is Alex Haley's Family Chronicle Fact, Fiction or a Bastard Blend?" *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times.

<sup>155</sup> Donald R. Wright, "Uprooting Kunta Kinte: On the Perils of Relying on Encyclopedic Informants," *History in Africa*, 8 (1981): pp. 207-208, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3171516>.



a local entertainer and teller of stories.”<sup>156</sup> His status as an amateur storyteller did not necessarily discredit Fofana as an informant; some of the elders Wright interviewed proved more knowledgeable in some respects than professional griots. In the course of an hour-long interview, however, the only person about whom Fofana provided specific information was Kunta Kinte.<sup>157</sup> On a follow-up visit to Juffure in December 1974, Wright simply asked to speak to the people who were best informed about Gambian history. Fofana was not among the persons to whom he was referred, leading Wright to conclude that “as an informant, Fofana—neither griot nor too highly respected an elder—was clearly second-rate.”<sup>158</sup> Wright also criticized Haley for reciting too many specifics of his family story when he made his initial inquiries; later, Haley could never know whether he was hearing authentic Gambian oral tradition or merely having his own narrative recited back to him. Wright identified other problems, including Haley’s methods for dating Kunta Kinte’s capture and his failure to consider information from other sources. After his interview with Fofana, Alex Haley asked Bakary Sidibe, the Gambian archivist to gather additional information. Sidibe, whom Wright describes as “one of the most avid and skilled collectors of oral data in West Africa” interviewed Fofana again,<sup>159</sup> as well as Sherif Jebarteh, a

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 208

<sup>157</sup> During their conversation, Fofana spoke of children being separated from their parents and stolen by slavers. Wright asked, “Can you think of anyone who disappeared in this way?” Fofana replied, “That is our relative, Kunta Kinte. He was our ancestor. He was stolen. On the day when he was stolen, everybody was sad, no meals were cooked because he was a very outstanding young man.” Fofana mentions no other ancestor who was kidnapped. Richard Wright, interview with Keba Fofana, September 29, 1974, interpreted by Bakary Sidibe, translated by Bina Jamme, Donald R. Wright papers on Mandinka Origins, History, and Culture in The Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau, 1967-1980, Box 1 Folder 12, p. 4, Michigan State University Libraries Special Collections.

<sup>158</sup> Wright, “Uprooting Kunta Kinte,” 209. Wright later said in a phone interview that when he went into a place and asked to speak to the most knowledgeable informants, he would tell them he was interested in history and “let them narrate as they would.” Sometimes that narration could last as long as an hour. By contrast, Wright recalls that “a lot of the interview with Fofana was asking questions and getting responses.” Wright also stated, “It seemed clear to me then and clear to me now that he [Fofana] had been schooled in what to say before Haley arrived. I believe that firmly. He didn’t know a whole lot else.” Donald R. Wright, in discussion with the author, August 18, 2011.

<sup>159</sup> Wright, “Uprooting Kunta Kinte,” 212. The translated transcript of this interview is likely the account Mark Ottaway found in the Gambian National Archive. While Wright conducted his field research in Gambia, Bakary Sidibe, who served as a translator for Wright, allowed him access to the recordings of Sidibe’s follow-up interview with Fofana. That interview was translated by a high school student, and typed by Wright. Donald R. Wright, in discussion with the author, August 18,

true griot “whose father had been patronized by a prominent member of a Kinte lineage.” Haley apparently disregarded the information provided by Jebarteh because it contradicted Fofana’s account, which better served Haley’s purposes.<sup>160</sup> Wright concluded that “the number and character of the defects in Haley’s African research are sufficient to demolish his frequently-espoused claim to have identified a specific African ancestor, Kunta Kinte, who lived in the 1760s in Juffure and who was kidnapped into slavery and shipped to America.” Wright speculated that Kunta Kinte was either “a wholly fictitious figure” or a real person whose biography was tailored to Haley’s needs.<sup>161</sup>

Similarly, historian David Gamble found so many historical and cultural inaccuracies in the Gambian section of *Roots*, he judged those chapters “very difficult to read.”<sup>162</sup> Gamble catalogued the factual errors in “Postmortem: A Study of the Gambian Section of Alex Haley’s ‘Roots,’” a 144-page analysis he compiled in 2000. Among the problems Gamble identified are Haley’s geographic relocation of Juffure in order to “remove it from European influence,” incorrect meanings ascribed to Mandinka words Haley did not fully understand, the overestimation of Islamic influence during the period of Kunta Kinte’s youth, as well as the misrepresentation of family structures, parenting techniques, and educational instruction.<sup>163</sup> He also enumerated several instances of undocumented “borrowing” from Elspeth Huxley’s *Four Guineas*, D.T. Niane’s *Sundianta: An Epic of Old Mali*, and Mungo Park’s *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*.<sup>164</sup>

In addition to the problems with the Gambian research, Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown

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<sup>160</sup> Wright, “Uprooting Kunta Kinte,” 213.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>162</sup> Gamble, “Postmortem,” 57.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 59, 60, 61, 71-73

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 83-110.

Mills found plenty to dispute the North American chapters of *Roots* in the public records where Haley's ancestors were reportedly owned as slaves. Most notably, the slave Toby, whom Haley identifies as the same Mandinka ancestor who was kidnapped from Gambia, transported in the hold of slave ship, and sold at auction in October 1767, appears in legal documents of Spotsylvania County as early as 1762, when William Waller inherited Toby from his father. As they found no record of how Toby came to be the property of the elder Waller, the Millses suggest that the real Toby may have been born a slave on Colonel Waller's plantation. John Waller, the elder brother to whom William conveyed his entire paternal bequest, did transfer ownership of Toby back to his brother in 1768 in the document Haley's research turned up. But the bondsman's appearance in six earlier documents that predate the arrival of the *Lord Ligonier* at Annapolis prove that Toby could not have been among its human cargo and, as the Millses assert, "Toby Waller was not Kunta Kinte."<sup>165</sup>

Their search of property, probate, and tax records reveal too many inconsistencies to fully enumerate, but on the whole, the public records' contradiction of crucial aspects of Haley's narrative, and their inability to corroborate others lead the authors to conclude that "the Virginia chapters of [Haley's] saga do not represent a documented ancestry for the author or for the descendants of the white family alleged to have owned his family."<sup>166</sup> The Millses report similar findings in their search of the North Carolina records, which lead them to question whether Tom Lea, the master whom Haley claimed as his third-great-grandfather, ever owned Haley's ancestors. The Millses also note Lea's death sometime between October 1844 and March 1845. This fact is inconsistent with Haley's account of the gambling debt that separates Chicken George from his family by sending him to England, where his servitude goes unchallenged, though slavery was illegal there. The Millses conclude, "The degree of

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<sup>165</sup> Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, "'Roots' and the New 'Faction': A Legitimate Tool for Clio?" *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89, no. 1 (January 1981): 9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4248448>.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

discrepancy which exists between the Haley family chronicle and documentable facts inevitably calls into question both the legitimacy of *Roots* as ‘history’ and its very essence as an expression of one family’s heritage.”<sup>167</sup> When they revisited the issue three years later, they concluded that “it is difficult to find any shreds of fact within Haley’s ‘faction.’”<sup>168</sup>

In February 1993, a year after Haley’s death, CBS broadcast the six-hour miniseries *Queen*, based on the life of Haley’s paternal grandmother. Later that month, journalist Philip Nobile, the first to examine the Alex Haley Papers at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, published an exposé, “Uncovering Roots,” in *The Village Voice*. Nobile pronounced *Roots* “the modern era’s most successful literary hoax.”<sup>169</sup> The book Haley presented as the product of years of diligent inquiry was built, according to Nobile, on “a pyramid of bogus research”; and the author’s numerous accounts of his ancestral search were, Nobile asserted, “part of an elegant and complex make-it-up-as-you-go-along scam.” An audio recording of Haley’s session with Keba Fofana, which Haley allowed no one to hear during his lifetime, coupled with other transcripts, reveal that Haley knew before he went to Juffure that a match to his grandmother’s story had been found. He prefaced his conversation with Fofana by stating he wanted to find a specific date for his ancestor’s supposed capture. Nobile also notes inconsistencies in the evolution of Haley’s research account, from which he posits that the words Kamby Bolongo never existed in Haley’s family tradition but that these were inventions first translated from English to Mandinka, rather than the other way around. Funerary records show Cousin Georgia Anderson died four days prior, not within the hour of Haley’s arrival in Juffure, as the author claims in *Roots*. Haley’s account of how he wrote the Middle Passage sections of *Roots*, by sneaking into the hold of the *African Star*, also could not have happened, wrote Nobile. The ship’s former first mate told

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>168</sup> Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, “The Genealogist’s Assessment of Alex Haley’s *Roots*,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 72 (March 1984): 45.

<sup>169</sup> Philip Nobile, “Uncovering *Roots*.”

Nobile that he held the keys to the cargo hold and that if Haley had gone down there to write Kunta Kinte's Middle Passage crossing, "he would have died from the cocoa fumes." Nobile reported that Ken McCormick, the former editor-in-chief of Doubleday, told him the first 185-page installment Haley submitted was so disorganized, the publisher hired two ghostwriters to work with Haley. As one of the writers, McCormick named former *Playboy* editor Murray Fisher, who quit his job at the magazine to work full time with Haley on *Roots*, but Fisher downplayed his involvement to Nobile; McCormick couldn't recall the second writer.

In a letter to *The Village Voice*, Fisher replied that he was "stunned not only at the viciousness of [the article's] attack but at the writer's contempt for truth." Fisher insisted that he had acted only as Haley's editor, never as the author of *Roots*.<sup>170</sup> One reader, who considered Nobile's article to be beneath the *Voice*'s usual standards, wrote, "Obviously, *Roots* was 'historical fiction,' with its sliding scale of rigor concerning accuracy and documentation. So? Who really thought differently, given the paucity of records and the hostility of the record keepers to their wares?"<sup>171</sup> The backlash against Nobile's article suggests that to whatever degree Haley's genealogical claims propelled the book's initial popularity, readers had come to value the book for different reasons. Somehow, the question of whether Kunta Kinte was a real person and Haley's distant ancestor became more a reflection on Nobile than on Haley's research. In the *New York Amsterdam News*, Abiola Sinclair, asked of Nobile's article, "Can anyone tell me what was behind that vicious, mean-spirited, ugly and totally unnecessary attack on Alex Haley...?"<sup>172</sup> A follow-up editorial by Herb Boyd in the *Amsterdam News* dismissed

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<sup>170</sup> Murray Fisher, "One-Man Lynch Mob," letter to the editor, *The Village Voice*, March 2, 1993, ProQuest Alt-Press Watch.

<sup>171</sup> Clay Shirky, "Trashing Haley," letter to the editor, *The Village Voice*, March 9, 1993, ProQuest Alt-Press Watch. A letter by Professor Robert L. Harris of the Africana Studies & Research Center at Cornell University questioned the veracity of Nobile's account based on an obvious factual error; Nobile had misdated the assassination of Malcolm X as February 21, 1964; the assassination occurred February 21, 1965. Robert L. Harris, "Dead Wrong," Letters, *The Village Voice*, March 9, 1993, ProQuest Alt-Press Watch.

Nobile's evidence against Haley as "mostly circumstantial." Boyd considered Nobile's conclusions to be largely unfounded and a mere rehashing of Mark Ottaway's charges. On his own visit to Juffure, Boyd had spoken to Kinte family members and the village chief, who confirmed Haley's account to him, though this corroboration is not surprising given the enormous influence of *Roots* on Gambian culture and tourism. Boyd conceded that Haley may have been "rather sloppy in his research" and—based on a substantial out-of-court settlement—"clearly guilty of plagiarism." He also argued, however, that it would be an "exaggeration" to infer that "the basic core of *Roots* is a fabrication." He continued:

Indeed Haley's excesses were not necessary; but given the historical denial of the Black experience and our contributions, the invisibility of our presence, these egregious mistakes are forgivable. There was no need for Haley to utter one little white lie in his desire to establish what he would later call "symbolic truth." It is too bad that this "symbolic truth" for Nobile and several others is viewed as an attempt to pull a fast one on the American people.<sup>173</sup>

Producer A'Lelia Bundles, whom Nobile had not interviewed but who had assisted Haley with research on her grandmother, Madame C.J. Walker, told a *Washington Post* columnist that far from the Alex Haley Nobile describes, the one she knew, "wasn't willfully evil." "His objective," Bundles said, "was to help [African Americans] find our history." Though she acknowledged that Nobile's charges were "probably true," she argued, "What is the bigger lie? School history textbooks ... negating our ancestors' contributions to civilization, or Alex Haley fudging some facts to even the score?" According to Bundles, "Every ethnic group has a mythology. ... Until 'Roots' ... there was nothing in the popular culture to refute the paragraph in elementary school history class that said, 'slaves picked the cotton, were happy and life wasn't so bad.' I can still feel the sting I felt in my chest when I read that ... 'Roots' gave the world another picture."

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<sup>172</sup> Abiola Sinclair, "Alex Haley Posthumously Beheaded in *The Village Voice*," *New Amsterdam News*, February 27, 1993, ProQuest Alt-Press Watch.

<sup>173</sup> Herb Boyd, "More on the *Village Voice*'s Hatchet Job on Alex Haley," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 6, 1993, ProQuest Alt-Press Watch.

Donna Britt, the columnist who reported Bundles's comments wrote, "Knowingly publishing fiction as fact is inexcusable" and that the Doubleday editors who allowed the book to be marketed as nonfiction should "share the blame." "If Nobile is correct," Britt wrote, "it means Haley lied about things too important to be falsified. It means that part of what made me weep for 15 minutes after watching 'Roots II' was a lie." But she added, "Whatever the truth of Nobile's conclusions, I'm grateful to Haley for having given all African Americans a family tree whose branches stretched clear to Africa." In her conclusion, Britt cited facts of African kidnappings, the Middle Passage, and enslavement of at least forty million people in the United States. "More than anyone," wrote Britt, Alex Haley had told their story to twentieth century Americans.<sup>174</sup>

Columnist Clarence Page observed, "If *Roots* was a hoax, it was a hoax Americans wanted desperately to believe." According to Page, "Haley's image survives like Teflon because of a larger truth: Whether Kunta Kinte existed or not, Haley's African ancestors did not come over on the *Mayflower*. Like other African-Americans, they are living evidence of a brutal institution whose legacy Americans are still trying to live down."<sup>175</sup>

Why did Americans want so badly to believe in Haley's genealogical miracle? Part of the answer may be suggested by the miniseries. Twice, the series departs from the book with its characters' attempts to restore social ties that have been severed by slavery. Kunta's visit to Maggie—with his impossible hope of returning to Gambia—and Kizzy's attempt to find her parents both end in disappointment but suggest the impetus to return as an attempt to repair what slavery has destroyed. Alex Haley's claim of tracing his family to a specific African ancestor and returning to that ancestor's native village represented the ultimate act of reparation. To return to the place where one's first

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<sup>174</sup> Donna Britt, "Rooting Up Haley's Legacy," *The Washington Post*, March 2, 1993, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>175</sup> Clarence Page, "Haley: Solving the Riddle of Identity," *The Oregonian* (Portland, OR), March 13, 1993, LexisNexis Academic.

enslaved ancestor was kidnapped would constitute a highly symbolic reversal of the losses people experienced under slavery.

Almost forty years later, the legacy of *Roots* may be less about whether Haley accomplished that feat of genealogical research than the extent to which the book and miniseries changed the popular understanding of slavery. *Roots* was not the first narrative to be told from the perspective of slaves, but it made the experience of bondspeople widely known and accessible to millions. As critics have noted, that popularity owed much to Haley's claims of finding his ancestor and probably also the book's nonfiction label. Would *Roots* have achieved the same popularity otherwise? To ponder a counterfactual scenario in which the book was presented as a novel may be irrelevant at this point because *Roots* has worked itself into public consciousness in other ways. In September 1981, a plaque was placed at the Annapolis dock. Its inscription read, "Commemorating the arrival in this harbor of Kunta Kinte immortalized by Alex Haley in *Roots* and all others who came to these shores in bondage and who, by their toil, character and ceaseless struggle for freedom, have helped to make these United States."<sup>176</sup> Within two days of its placement, the plaque was stolen. A calling card left at the site announced, "You have been patronized by the KKK."<sup>177</sup> The final phase of a much larger memorial was dedicated at the Annapolis City Dock in 2002. Its centerpiece, installed in 1999, is a bronze sculpture of Alex Haley reading to children. News reports about the memorial related the story of Kunta Kinte as though his status as Haley's ancestor and his arrival in Annapolis aboard the *Lord Ligonier* remain a matter of accepted fact. An article in the *Washington Post* described the Kinte-Haley Memorial, not as homage to a novelized character but "the only monument in the United States

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<sup>176</sup> Associated Press, "Kunta Kinte Plaque Stolen in Annapolis" PM Cycle, September 23, 1981, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.



commemorating the name and place of arrival of an enslaved African”<sup>178</sup> Similar language appears on the website of the Kunta Kinte-Alex Haley Foundation.<sup>179</sup> In The Gambia, in 1974, Donald Wright discovered that the story of Kunta Kinte had already made its way into the narrative repertoire of elders and griots he interviewed, a fact that further suggests the malleability of oral tradition. In several subsequent visits, Wright has documented that the story of Kunta Kinte is not only recited as fact, it has become a major component of the Gambian tourist industry. Kunta Kinte has come to embody the region’s cultural memory of the international slave trade.<sup>180</sup>

### Harold Courlander’s *The African*

In April 1977, the same month that Haley revisited Juffure and won the Pulitzer Prize and that Ottaway’s article appeared in the *Sunday Times*, Margaret Walker filed a plagiarism lawsuit, claiming Haley had copied substantially from her novel *Jubilee*. The lawsuit was dismissed, but another by Harold Courlander, resulted in Haley paying a \$650,000 out-of-court settlement. Though Courlander’s novel follows the protagonist Hwesuhunu, after his escape from bondage, similarities between *Roots* and *The African*, are discernible in the slave ship chapters and in the declaration by one of Courlander’s shipwreck survivors that, “We are of different tribes... But as of today we are one village”<sup>181</sup> The phrase “one village” appears both in the book and film versions of *Roots* to convey a sense of Pan-Africanism among the captives. Courlander’s novel also highlights the feeling of estrangement between the

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<sup>178</sup> Nelson Hernandez, “A Symbol of History and Hope; Kunta Kinte-Alex Haley Memorial is Dedicated in Annapolis,” *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2002, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>179</sup> “The Sculpture Group,” Kunta Kinte-Alex Haley Foundation, kintehaley.org, <http://www.kintehaley.org/testsite/the-sculpture-group/>; accessed March 10, 2014.

<sup>180</sup> Donald R. Wright, “The Effect of Alex Haley’s *Roots* On How Gambians Remember The Atlantic Slave Trade,” *History in Africa*, 38 (2011), 295-318 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41474553>.

<sup>181</sup> Harold Courlander, *The Africa: A Novel* (1967; New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 50.

Hwesuhunu and other black people who “should have been his countrymen.”<sup>182</sup> In Courlander’s novel, American-born slaves deride the African-born bondspeople for their awkwardness communicating in English and performing unfamiliar tasks. As Courlander writes, “Among many of the slaves there was not only a readiness to forget Africa, but even a vanity in having been born in Georgia.”<sup>183</sup> As he had with *Jubilee*, Haley claimed he had never read *The African*, until three typed pages of passages from the novel were discovered wedged in a manuscript draft of *Roots* that Haley had submitted during pre-trial discovery. During the trial, Haley also admitted under cross examination that he had similarly copied from *The Story of Phillis Wheatley* and Mungo Park’s *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>184</sup> “New Revelations in Roots Case” *New York Magazine*, February 12, 1979, p. 69, Google Books.com, <http://books.google.com/books?id=BuECAAAMBAJ&pg=PA69&dq=new+york+magazine+-+february+12,+1979+and+Roots&hl=en&sa=X&ei=oWkeU9qOOMa4kQfX7ICYBg&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=new%20york%20magazine%20-%20february%2012%2C%201979%20and%20Roots&f=false>; accessed August 3, 2011.

## Chapter 8

### “A Wound that has Not Healed”: Sherley Anne Williams, Dessa Rose, and the Literature of Slavery

“Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often, these have betrayed us. I loved history as a child, until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free.” —Sherley Anne Williams, author’s note, *Dessa Rose*.

In 1829, in northeastern Kentucky, approximately ninety slaves on a trader’s coffle revolted against their captors. The trader suffered minor injuries. Two of his associates were killed.<sup>1</sup> Five slave men and a pregnant woman named Dinah were tried as leaders of the uprising. They were convicted and sentenced to death. The men were hanged immediately, but Dinah’s execution was delayed until after she gave birth to her baby.<sup>2</sup> As Sherley Anne Williams later recalled, “It was this last detail that tugged at my conscience, that both angered and saddened me, that would not let me rest.”<sup>3</sup> Williams, a poet and English professor, first read about the case in Angela Davis’s essay “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.” When she traced Dinah’s story to Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts*, Williams also learned of a white woman in North Carolina who in 1830 was accused of giving refuge to runaway slaves. Williams thought it sad that the two women never met.<sup>4</sup> These true stories of resistance inspired Williams’s 1986 novel *Dessa Rose*. When protagonist Dessa meets Ruth Sutton, a former Charleston belle who is abandoned by her gambler husband, the women initially clash over two very different recollections of slavery; but in an unlikely collaboration

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<sup>1</sup> As noted by Herbert Aptheker, this incident is also cited in David Walker’s *Appeal*, with particular scorn for the slave who assisted the escape of the trader Henry Gordon, so that he could summon local authorities to subdue the rebellion; see David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 23-26.

<sup>2</sup> Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (The Kentucky Historical Society, 2003), 98.

<sup>3</sup> Sherley Anne Williams, “The Lion’s History: The Ghetto Writes B[lack],” *Soundings* (Summer/Fall 1993): 249.

<sup>4</sup> Sherley Anne Williams, author’s note, *Dessa Rose*, 5-6; see also Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 287-289. Both Aptheker and David Walker summarize the story from newspaper articles but the pregnant slave woman is not identified; Marion B. Lucas, citing an article from the *Kentucky Standard*, reports the slave’s name, Dinah.

with other runaway slaves, Dessa and Ruth become allies and subvert the power of the slaveholding regime. In *Dessa Rose*, Williams explores the problems of individual memory, physical and psychological trauma, as well as the trope of wounds and scars. Most significantly, *Dessa Rose* examines multiple forms of literacy and the power associated with reading, writing, and narrative control. In many ways, Williams's novel complements academic histories that had just begun to consider how women experienced slavery. More broadly, *Dessa Rose* responds to a literature about slavery that was too seldom authored by African Americans or told from their perspective, a body of work that gave even less consideration to the experience of enslaved women.

Sherley Anne Williams was the daughter of migrant farm laborers. Her father died of tuberculosis when she was eight years old; her mother died of a heart attack eight years later.<sup>5</sup> Williams described her childhood in Fresno, California, as “the most deprived, provincial kind of existence you can think of.”<sup>6</sup> Despite her mother's objections, Williams took refuge in books. As an adult, Williams speculated that her mother discouraged her from reading because she worried Williams would develop impossible aspirations and become, according to Williams, “really dissatisfied with my lot in life.”<sup>7</sup> Williams recalled browsing the shelves of a library, trying to discern from the titles—because she was too embarrassed to ask the librarian—if any of the books were about black people. She discovered Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Eartha Kitt's *Thursday's Child*, autobiographies Williams credited with helping her cope with the hardships of her own life.<sup>8</sup> Long before she knew of his African ancestry, Frank Yerby was one of Williams's favorite writers. “His works,” she later recalled, “awakened my interest in history, even though I seemed to have no place there except as slave and

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<sup>5</sup> Mona Gable, “Understanding the Impossible,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

savage.”<sup>9</sup> Encouraged to apply to college by a high school science teacher, Williams financed her education with money she earned harvesting fruit and cotton in the fields where her parents once worked.<sup>10</sup> Williams later wrote a children’s book, *Working Cotton*, which won a Caldecott Medal in 1993. Her first book of poetry, *The Peacock Poems*, was a finalist for the National Book Award.

In his review for the *New York Times*, David Bradley called *Dessa Rose* “an absorbing fusion that is both elegant poetry and powerful fiction.” He concluded that Williams had written a novel that was “artistically brilliant, emotionally affecting and totally unforgettable.”<sup>11</sup> After a positive critical reception and strong book sales, Williams sold the film rights to *Dessa Rose* and spent two years writing the screenplay. After a change in studio management, the new executives did not want to make the movie; on the day filming was set to begin, the project was cancelled.<sup>12</sup> A musical based on the novel opened in 2005 but was not well received by critics.<sup>13</sup>

As the novel opens, the title character Dessa is both slave and prisoner, condemned to death for her part in a coffle revolt. Erroneously written as a first-person account by Dessa, the initial passages compose an entry in the journal of Adam Nehemiah, the white author who interviews Dessa as research for his book on slave uprisings. Nehemiah records what appears to be but is not a transcript of every syllable Dessa utters. In fact, the entire account attributed to Dessa is reconstructed from a few sparse notes Nehemiah jots down during their interview. What purports to be a verbatim record is actually

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<sup>9</sup> Williams, “The Lion’s History,” 247.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> David Bradley, “On the Lam from Race and Gender,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 1986, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>12</sup> Valerie Takahama, “Novelist Won’t Let Hollywood Reality Stand in her Way,” *The Orange County Register*, February 8, 1989, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>13</sup> For example, one *New York Times* critic called it “a long, dreary sermon in song”; while *The New York Sun* charged that the production’s writer and composer had “pulled a surprisingly cuddly rabbit out of a very dark, very dangerous hat, turning a journey through hellfire into a cheerful march to female solidarity”; see Charles Isherwood, “Worlds Apart in the Deep South but Forming a Bond,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Helen Shaw, “A ‘Rose’ Without Thorns Smelling Too Sweet,” *The New York Sun*, March 22, 2005, LexisNexis Academic.

Nehemiah's highly subjective and unreliable interpretation.

Williams adapted the novel's first section from the short story "Meditations on History," which she wrote in response to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. As a white writer records the confessions of a black slave rebel on the eve of execution, *Dessa Rose* evokes both the 1831 pamphlet by Thomas Gray and the opening premise for Styron's 1967 novel.<sup>14</sup> In her preface to *Dessa Rose*, Williams acknowledges "being outraged by a certain, critically acclaimed novel" that she feels "travestied" the Nat Turner narrative.<sup>15</sup> Williams's omission of the title is especially noteworthy, given the importance she ascribes to naming. In *Dessa Rose*, speaking the names of the dead is a ritual of memorialization; the insult of misnaming represents a broader set of power relations. As she alludes to Styron's novel without specifically stating his name or the title of his book, Williams further signals her contempt, which, she later explained, stemmed from Styron's suggestion that Turner's "sexual obsession with a white woman" incited the rebellion, rather than the brutality of slavery. She was also incensed with the literary establishment for celebrating a novel she felt so falsely represented the Turner rebellion.<sup>16</sup>

Williams also viewed her difficulty finding a publisher for "Meditations on History" and her editor's insistence that she add an author's note to *Dessa Rose* as part of the same problem of literary

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<sup>14</sup> Sherley Anne Williams, "Meditations on History," in Mary Helen Washington, *Midnight Birds : Stories by Contemporary Black Women Writers* (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1980), 200-248. According to Suzan Harrison, Styron's *Confessions* and the first section of *Dessa Rose* are constructed around the "trope of failed slave narrative." Instead of a traditional slave narrative, told from the vantage point of freedom by a former slave who has escaped his or her bondage, these "failed slave narratives" feature slaves imprisoned for their part in a slave revolt. The imprisoned slave is "interrogated by a white man, a southerner, who seeks to appropriate his/her history for purposes of condemning the individual slave and justifying the continued enslavement of the race as a whole." "Rather than affirming black subjectivity, agency and literacy," Harrison explains, "this trope marks the slave's reinscription into the master narrative of slavery." *Dessa Rose*, however, "subverts and escapes from the trope of the failed slave narrative that Styron's novel fails to question." Suzan Harrison, "Mastering Narratives/Subverting Masters: Rhetorics of Race in the Confessions of Nat Turner, *Dessa Rose*, and Celia, a Slave," *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 35, no. 3 (Spring, 1997): 13, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Sherley Anne Williams, author's note, *Dessa Rose*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Mona Gable, "Understanding the Impossible."

and historical representation that she attempts to remedy with Dessa's story.<sup>17</sup> Williams details her experience in "The Lion's History: The Ghetto Writes B[l]ack." The article takes its title from a letter Wendell Phillips wrote to Frederick Douglass regarding Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Referring to the fable, "The Man and the Lion," in which the lion declares that "he should not be so misrepresented 'when the lions wrote history,'" Phillips tells Douglass, "I am glad the time has come, 'when the lions write history.'"<sup>18</sup> Williams notes a "sad, if unconscious, irony" in the statement, given that Phillips provided one of the prefatory testimonials that were considered necessary to "authenticate" narratives written by ex-slaves.<sup>19</sup> The underlying assumption was that the life narrative recounted by the African American author or narrator who had lived the experience was not sufficient by itself and required the certification of a white "guarantor" who attested to the veracity of the narrative.<sup>20</sup> Williams explains,

This Lion's history, though written by himself, is personal story rather than the grand march of events engineered by exceptional men that shape the lives of others, that is, history as man writes it of himself. The Lion's "misrepresentation" is thus due to the absence of his personal story in man-written history. The major function of Lion's history, then, is to balance the representations of the character of institutional oppression rather than to change the discourse of History itself. Yet even personal histories, such as Douglass', need [white] men to mediate between them and their intended audience.<sup>21</sup>

Williams also observes, "The tense and ambiguous relationship between story and history inherent in Phillips' fable, between teller and guarantor in the physical make-up of the liberation narratives, marks much African-American literature." That, she recalled, "was one of the shadows I labored under as I

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<sup>17</sup> Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Wendell Phillips to Frederick Douglass, Boston, April 22, 1845, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, quoted in Williams, "The Lion's History," 245.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, "The Lion's History," 245.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, "The Lion's History," 245.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

wrote *Dessa Rose*.”<sup>22</sup>

Williams tried for years to have the earliest incarnation of Dessa’s story, “Meditations on History,” published in a journal. She recounts how rejection letters often contained the contradictory claims that no “historical precedent” existed for Adam Nehemiah and that his character seemed “stereotypical,” which by definition, Williams points out, means “taking one observable, i.e. historical trait, and making it stand for the whole of the person or group.” “What they were really saying to me,” Williams wrote, “was that I had no authority to create a dumb white man, not if I wanted the story published in a white journal, that the Lion was free to tell her story as long as it confirmed the white man’s history.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, when her editors pressed her to add an author’s note delineating the fact-based events that inspired *Dessa Rose* from her own creative work, Williams viewed this as a demand for authentication, though in her case, it was to attest that the story was fiction.<sup>24</sup> The request, Williams believed, would not have been made of a white author. As Ashraf Rushdy aptly observes, “What struck Williams was not so much the fact that there existed inequities in the field of cultural production, since she obviously knew that from her earlier experiences, but rather that this inequity assumed a form that precisely replicated the earliest confrontation between master texts and slave narratives.”<sup>25</sup> In order to see the novel published, Williams “didn’t argue the point” and wrote the author’s note, which she placed at the front of the novel “so that Dessa would have the last word.” “I ‘authenticated’ my own fiction,” Williams later recalled, “and tried to subvert the convention.”<sup>26</sup>

One of the first problems that presented itself to Williams as she began to conceive Dessa’s

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>25</sup> Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives*, 141.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 258.



story was the need to explain, “How had the tale of an illiterate slave girl survived? What possible interest could it have for the white people who, almost inevitably, would have had to preserve it?” Williams anticipated that she would need to provide “a plausible explanation for the survival of Dessa’s tale,” if she had any hope of publishing the story. Williams reminded readers that she “was writing in the days when black women had no history, when black people barely had one.”<sup>27</sup> In the original short story “Meditations on History,” Williams answered the question of transmission by presenting the story through Adam Nehemiah’s journal entries. “The journal of a white man was more likely to be preserved than any other kind of non-commercial writing,” Williams explained.<sup>28</sup> In *Dessa Rose*, though Nehemiah’s journal entries open the novel, the narrative perspective changes, and readers learn, in the end, that Dessa preserved her own account by dictating it to a literate descendant who wrote it down according to her instruction. As Williams told her original short story through Nehemiah’s journal entries, she said she “took great delight in finding ways for Dessa’s true story to come through to the reader without Nehemiah, in fact being aware of what was going on and being truly ignorant of what was being said.” Highlighting the problems of a white amanuensis recording the slave’s story was, according to Williams, her “way of saying to Styron, ‘See what you missed. You went for the easy thing—the stereotyped thing. This is the real story that you missed.’”<sup>29</sup>

Williams also responded to Styron in her 1972 work of literary criticism, *Give Birth to Brightness*, when she wrote, “Despite William Styron’s meditations on history,” the African American tradition—including oral, written, fictional and nonfictional accounts—regarded slave revolt leaders as “men of great nobility and physical prowess.”<sup>30</sup> Williams’s scholarly rendering of the rebel figure is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>29</sup> “Sherley Anne Williams,” in Shirley Marie Jordan, *Broken Silences: Interviews with Black and White Women Writers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 288-289.

instructive. “The rebels were revolting against a system which equated human beings with property,” she wrote, “and they were asserting their right and the right of their followers to determine their own destinies, their right to be treated as men and women without the descriptive modifiers which always reduced their status to something less than that of other men and women, that is, white men and women.”<sup>31</sup> Notably, Williams chooses the pejorative terms “The Darky” and “The Wench” as titles for the first two sections of *Dessa Rose*, while the third section, the only one narrated by Dessa, is titled “The Negress,” from the French term meaning simply “black woman.”

As Williams began to expand her short story to explore the fictional meeting of two remarkable women, she realized that she could not have Nehemiah “tell even part of the story.” She did not want to allow him that much control over the narrative. In the first two sections, Williams employs an omniscient narrator. For the third and final section, she considered relating the story of Dessa’s life from birth to adulthood and modeling the heroine’s biography on the antebellum slave narratives. Instead, as *Dessa Rose* demonstrates the inability of the white amanuensis to completely, accurately tell the slave’s story, the novel culminates in Dessa’s autonomous narration.<sup>32</sup> Williams said her decision was influenced by Robert Stepto’s inference in *From Behind the Veil* that the use of a third-person narrator in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* indicated Zora Neale Hurston’s distrust of Janey’s ability to tell her story.<sup>33</sup> As Dessa assumes the first-person narration of the last third of the novel, Williams not

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<sup>30</sup> Sherley Anne Williams, *Give Birth to Brightness: A Thematic Study in Neo-Black Literature* (New York: The Dial Press, 1972), 59.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Marta E. Sánchez interprets the novel’s “revelatory ending” as suggesting Dessa has been the narrator of the entire novel. I agree with Sánchez that in Parts I and II Dessa, Nehemiah, and Ruth are all narrated subjects and in Part III, Dessa “wrests the narrative voice and sustains it until the end,” but Parts I and II relate the interior thoughts of Nehemiah and Ruth Sutton, Ruth’s recollections of her relationship with Dorcas, and conversations that do not include Dessa. It would be virtually impossible for Dessa to achieve the omniscient narration of these earlier sections, therefore I consider only the third section to be narrated by Dessa herself; see Marta E. Sánchez, “The Estrangement Effect in Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*,” *Genders* 15 (Winter, 1992): 23.

<sup>33</sup> Jordan, *Broken Silences: Interviews with Black and White Women Writers*, 288.

only seeks to discredit the death row slave confessional represented by Thomas Gray and William Styron but to liberate her heroine from a larger and equally problematic tradition of slavery literature.

As the epigraph for the first section of the novel, Williams selects a partial quotation from Frederick Douglass: “You have seen how a man was made a slave...”<sup>34</sup> The quote refers to the process of dehumanization Douglass experienced in slavery, particularly during his first six months hired to slave breaker Edward Covey. The complete quotation from the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man,” prefaces Douglass’s account of his fight with Covey and suggests how he began to resist and reverse his experience of brutalization.<sup>35</sup> His refusal to submit to a whipping by Covey, writes Douglass, became his “glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom.”<sup>36</sup> In a separate reading of the famous fight, Williams emphasizes that Covey, not Douglass is the aggressor. Douglass, she notes, only grabs hold of Covey’s shirt collar and “brings the white man to the ground but never lays violent hands on him.” Douglass, Williams concludes, “is thus able to dominate Covey by his own self-restraint and self-control rather than by *force major*.”<sup>37</sup> In *Dessa Rose*, Williams suggests a related premise that slaves’ exertion of physical violence, far from alleviating brutality against slaves, actually exacerbates it. Both the coffle revolt and Dessa’s earlier assault of her mistress result in punishment that causes her most extreme experiences of dehumanization. When the characters in *Dessa Rose* succeed in subverting the system, they do so by manipulating the expectations of the slaveholding authority and outwitting their adversaries.

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<sup>34</sup> Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (1986; repr., New York: Quill, 1999), 15. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Dessa Rose*.

<sup>35</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself*, ed. John Blassingame et al. (1844; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 50.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Sherley Anne Williams, “Some Implications of Womanist Theory,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York: Meridian, 1990), 72.

With *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Williams evokes the best known of the antebellum slave narratives, a literary genre that, according Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Charles Davis, “represents the attempts of blacks to write themselves into being.” In their introduction to *The Slave’s Narrative*, a collection of slave narrative criticism published the year prior to *Dessa Rose*, Gates and Davis reflect, “What a curious idea: through the mastery of the formal Western languages, the presupposition went, a black person could become a human being by an act of self-creation through the mastery of language.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, however, the slave narrative imposes limitations on the ex-slave subject. In his seminal essay “I Was Born,” James Olney argues that slave narratives almost universally follow a common textual formula, what he terms the “master outline.”<sup>39</sup> While Olney takes Douglass’s *Narrative* as the exemplar of that outline, he also considers it to be, paradoxically, the only slave narrative that also transcends the limitations of the genre by articulating a distinct sense of Douglass’s selfhood. Other narratives written by ex-slaves, according to Olney, conform to the narrative model without expressing the same sense of individual identity as Douglass’s *Narrative*. In slave narratives “written under immediate abolitionist guidance and control,” meaning as-told-to narratives written by a white amanuensis, the narrators are even more likely, according to Olney, to “remain slaves to a prescribed, conventional, and imposed form” and be held “captive to the abolitionist intentions.”<sup>40</sup> With her decision not to pattern a portion of *Dessa Rose* after the original slave narratives, Williams rejected a model that, despite its importance as an act of literary “self-creation,” also functioned as an enslaved literary form.

By quoting Douglass’s famous phrase “You have seen how a man was made a slave...,”

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<sup>38</sup> Introduction to *The Slave’s Narrative*, eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xxii.

<sup>39</sup> James Olney, “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature,” in Davis and Gates, *The Slave’s Narrative*, 148.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 167-168.

Williams also positions *Dessa Rose* as a response to literature and scholarship that virtually ignored the experience of enslaved women. In her choice of epigraph, Williams implies that readers will likely already know Douglass's story and the stories of other slave men; less familiar are the stories of enslaved women like those who populate Williams's novel. Among the antebellum slave narratives, only 12 percent are estimated to have been written by black women. "From this statistic," writes Deborah McDowell, "we can conclude, not surprisingly, that, as autobiography, the slave narratives are primarily expressions of male subjectivity, and, as history, they are narratives of his-story." McDowell notes that "when black women figure in these male narratives, it is largely as victims of sexual abuse."<sup>41</sup> This was also the case in the twentieth century, with Alex Haley's treatment of Kizzy in the book version of *Roots*, a text that Williams pointedly criticizes in *Dessa Rose*. The fictional Adam Nehemiah plans to title his book *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them*. In subsequent references, Williams abbreviates the title *Roots*, as if to equate Haley's bestseller with Nehemiah's work in progress. Williams most likely draws the connection as an indictment of Haley's superficial treatment of women and the trauma of sexual abuse. Haley renders the psychological effects of Kizzy's exploitation primarily through the recollections of her son George, the male child born of the abuse. Kizzy's experience, like her overall role in the novel, is subordinated to male characters.

In *Dessa Rose*, Nehemiah's book on slave insurrections is a follow-up to his *Master's Complete Guide to Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents*. Formerly an itinerant tutor, he compiled this how-to compendium from the philosophies of the wealthy planters who hired him to teach their children. His publisher predicts the second volume will outsell his previous work. Nehemiah expects the book to establish him as "an important Southern author" (*Dessa Rose*, 25). Though he has never owned a slave,

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<sup>41</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, "Witnessing Slavery after Freedom—Dessa Rose," in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 146.

Nehemiah is a social climber who desires acceptance in the highest circles of planter gentry.<sup>42</sup> When Dessa asks the reason for the interviews, he conceals his personal agenda behind the claims of magnanimity. “I write what I do,” he tells Dessa, “in the hope of helping others be happy in the life that has been sent them,” but when Dessa falls ill, Nehemiah abandons any pretense of altruism and writes in his journal, “Pray God this darky don’t die before I get my book” (*Dessa Rose*, 32).

Nehemiah’s journal suggests the kind of document from which historians have drawn in their interpretation of history, but here Williams employs the genre to illustrate how Nehemiah’s literary designs betray Dessa and her story. After a conversation about the death of Dessa’s partner Kaine and her subsequent sale, Nehemiah records, “the facts of the darky’s history as I have thus far uncovered them: The master smashed the young buck’s banjo. The Young buck attacked the master. The Master killed the young buck. The darky attacked the master—and was sold to the Wilson slave coffle.”

Nehemiah’s refusal to remember or use Kaine’s name, his habit of calling Dessa the wrong name, and his use of objectifying appellations belong to the trope of the power of naming. Literary scholar Adam McKible reads Nehemiah’s first name as evoking his “role as archetypal namer and controller of language,” while his surname evokes the prophet of the Hebrew Bible and suggests the character’s “guardianship of traditional culture and values.”<sup>43</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson also notes the ironic rereading of the biblical figure who “constructed a wall to protect the Israelites against attack by their enemies”; in Williams’s novel, Nehemiah becomes a “racist and expert on the ‘sound management’ of slaves” in order to protect the South from slave insurrection.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Marta E. Sánchez similarly characterizes Nehemiah as “an opportunistic social climber,” who “had sought entrance into the southern planter elite through his education” but who discovered that rather than education, his “research and writing of handbooks on the details of managing slaves...had opened ‘doors to countless great houses to him.’” Sánchez, “The Estrangement Effect in Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*,” 25.

<sup>43</sup> Adam McKible, “‘These are the Facts of the Darky’s History’: Thinking History and Reading Names in Four African American Texts,” *African American Review* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 224, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041995>.

<sup>44</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues,” in Gates, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, 126.

When he does refer to Dessa by name, Nehemiah incorrectly calls her Odessa, adding an “O” that stands for “otherness” and “objectification.”<sup>45</sup> McKible reads this misnaming as Nehemiah’s attempt to “assert his social dominance and deny Dessa’s humanity.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Dessa’s elision of the author’s name signals her resistance of literary enslavement. At the end of the novel, both Dessa and Ruth Sutton insist on being called by their actual names, rather than Odessa or—in Ruth’s case—Rufel, Miz Ruint, or Mistress. “Insisting on the validity of their own experiences and the integrity of their own names,” writes McKible, “Dessa and Ruth resist and rewrite the Master narrative of antebellum slavery as represented by Adam Nehemiah.”<sup>47</sup>

In the course of the conversation, Nemi, as Dessa refers to him, has difficulty hearing Dessa’s words. She speaks so softly in a dialect he cannot understand that Dessa’s narrative becomes incomprehensible to the interviewer. Nehemiah’s failure to perceive Dessa’s story suggests a breakdown in the conversion of oral history to written text (*Dessa Rose*, 41). The interview questions are also problematic. According to Dessa, Nehemiah’s habit of inserting “unnecessary” words between his “‘why’ and what he wanted to know” render the questions as unintelligible to Dessa as her responses are to Nehemiah. Then, just when Dessa has “puzzled out” what Nehemiah wants to know,

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<sup>45</sup> Adam McKible, “‘These are the Facts of the Darky’s History’: Thinking History and Reading Names in Four African American Texts,” 233.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 223. In the fictional author Adam Nehemiah, Sherley Williams also inverts the given name and surname of the real nineteenth century New England minister, Nehemiah Adams, who wrote *A Southside View Slavery* after a three-month visit to the slaveholding South. The text is largely a defense of slavery, in which Adams renounces his former abolitionist views for the proslavery arguments of his hosts. Adams writes how he had expected to find an entire slave population “cowed down” in despair but claims to never have encountered “a better-looking, happier, more courteous set of people” than the slaves he observed during his visit. Adams repeats a similar pattern throughout the book, by which he suggests that he and other abolitions had “been under wrong impressions” and, based on what he witnessed first-hand, should “begin to have our notions corrected.” In one instance, Adams relates the horror of the public sale of an infant, only to relate his subsequent discovery that the transaction was executed to reunite the baby with its mother, rather than separate the two. Adams also insists, “A fugitive slave is not necessarily, nor as a matter of course, an object of compassion; it is not certain that he has fled from a bad to a better condition; that freedom in Boston is invariably preferable to slavery in Charleston.” Nehemiah Adams, *A South-side View of Slavery; or, Three months at the South, in 1854* (1854; GoogleBooks, 2011), 11,16, 24, 66-70, 131, [http://books.google.com/books?id=nHhXAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=a+south-side+view+of+slavery&hl=en&sa=X&ei=6BLUT\\_uQLIS29QT\\_6PTqAw&ved=0CEMQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=a%20south-side%20view%20of%20slavery&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=nHhXAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=a+south-side+view+of+slavery&hl=en&sa=X&ei=6BLUT_uQLIS29QT_6PTqAw&ved=0CEMQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=a%20south-side%20view%20of%20slavery&f=false); Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives*, 144.

he moves on to his insistent repetition of the question, “Who had the file?”—meaning the one he supposes Dessa and her fellow slaves used to escape the coffle. Nemi’s superfluous language corresponds to the pointless nature of the questions, which he asks without expecting reply (*Dessa Rose*, 56). He also does not suspect Dessa’s real motive for participating in the interviews. She hopes that her inquisitor might reveal information about her friends who escaped. Dessa’s nonresponse to the question “Who had the file?” is not the evasion Nemi assumes. A file had not been used; Nathan knocked the trader unconscious and took the keys from his saddlebags. Having no answers to the author’s presumptions, Dessa offers none (*Dessa Rose*, 56). As Nehemiah strikes Dessa for what he perceives as defiance, the physical assault literalizes the linguistic violence he commits in his journals and further intends to perpetrate in the book he envisions as his masterwork. Williams equates Nehemiah’s authorial violations with his attempt to re-enslave Dessa at the end of the novel. When they meet again in the third section, Nehemiah demands that Dessa undergo a body search that, he insists, will reveal scars identifying her as the fugitive prisoner he once interviewed. The scars, left by a whip and a hot brand below the waist, represent the master’s effort to inscribe his power on Dessa’s body.<sup>48</sup> The master’s attempt to conceal these marks where they would not be visible to potential buyers suggests a form of literacy within the slave market. The owner’s attempt to maximize Dessa’s sale price by localizing and hiding the scars acknowledges buyers’ expectation that they could, as Walter Johnson explains, “read” the bodies of slaves. In his study of the antebellum slave market, Johnson describes how buyers subjected slaves to intrusive physical examinations—how, for instance, they “palpated breasts and abdomens, searching for hernias and prolapsed organs and trying to massage

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<sup>48</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson considers “the site of the inscriptions—in the area of the genitalia” as “an attempt to inscribe the sign *slave* in an area that marks her as *woman*,” the effect of which is “to attempt to deprive the slave woman of her femininity and render the surface of her skin a parchment upon which meaning is etched by the whip (pen) of white patriarchal authority and sealed by the firebrand. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues,” 126-127.



bodies into revealing their reproductive history and capacity.”<sup>49</sup> Buyers’ chief concern was whether slave bodies bore scars from whipping, which Johnson, quoting Solomon Northup, explains “‘were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt [the trader’s] sale.’”<sup>50</sup> Within the context of a market transaction, bodies of the enslaved were treated as texts to be deciphered. Johnson describes a process in which, “Looking at the scars, slave buyers created whole stories for the people who stood stripped [to the waist] in front of them: perhaps if the scarring was very light the offense had been minor, perhaps if it was very old the vice had been whipped out of the slave.” According to Johnson, “The buyers thought they could read the slaves’ backs as encodings of their history.”<sup>51</sup> The whipping Dessa endures before the start of the novel is, therefore, an inscription of the master’s power, but also a manipulation of a future sale. The marks Dessa bears as punishment for assaulting her mistress make legible her history of rebelliousness and reduce her market value. Deliberately hiding the scars, Dessa’s master subverts buyers’ expectations about their ability to “read” submission in the unmarked flesh of Dessa’s back.

When he learns of the master’s deception, Nehemiah thinks the “complicity between slave trader and slave owner in the sale of a dangerous slave [is] a theme worth investigating” in his book, like Dessa’s revelations that slaves practiced contraception without their master’s knowledge (*Dessa Rose*, 21). Nehemiah’s insistence on bodily inspection at the end of the novel evokes a scene of degradation enacted time and again in the slave market. To the white amanuensis, as to the would-be slave masters, Dessa’s body becomes a text to decipher in much the same way Nehemiah presumes to interpret Dessa’s life experience.<sup>52</sup> When Dessa says in the epilogue, “I never will forget Nemi trying

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<sup>49</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 143.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

to read me,” she evokes Nehemiah’s efforts to rob her of both her history and body, essentially to deprive her of her selfhood. She cites this attempted theft as her reason for narrating the story to her descendants, for having it written down, and for requiring its recitation back to her. With these actions, Dessa exercises autonomy over her life narrative.

Dessa’s quest for narrative and authorial control embodies the politics of cultural memory at stake in the novel. As she equates Dessa’s enslavement to white male authorship (both the slaveholder’s and Nemi’s) Williams suggests how the lack of autonomous authorship, especially by African American women, has effected a kind of textual enslavement first in historical events, then in the writing of that history. As little more than a sequencing of events, the “history” Adam Nehemiah records in *Dessa Rose* scarcely represents the trauma and loss Dessa endures as a slave.

## Memories of Wounds

The first discussion between Dessa and Nehemiah culminates in Dessa’s recollection of her partner’s death. Dessa recalls Emmalina running to meet her with the news that Kaine assaulted their master with a hoe and the master bludgeoned Kaine with a shovel. Dessa recalls running to find Kaine lying on their pallet, head bleeding (*Dessa Rose*, 20). When she concludes, Nemi asks obtusely, “And what has that to do with you and the other slaves rising up against the trader and trying to kill white men?” (*Dessa Rose*, 20). In their second conversation, when Nemi is reluctant to disturb Dessa’s “trancelike state” and determines to “let the darky talk this out,” he finds, to his frustration, that Dessa has led him back to the same discussion (*Dessa Rose*, 39). Observing that Dessa was not “overly free in

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<sup>52</sup> Quoting Anne E. Goldman’s assertion that “both the body and the word become commodified; texts upon which the white makes his mark,” Suzan Harrison asserts that in *Dessa Rose*, “subversive readings of both body and word are possible: for the slave readers of Dessa’s textual body, the scars mark her refusal to capitulate to oppression; they are disruptions of the dominant culture’s racial narrative”; see Harrison, “Mastering Narratives/Subverting Masters,” 18.

her speech,” Nemi offers self-serving assurances, meant to assuage Dessa’s fears about the “possible repercussions in talking freely.” Instead, he only reveals himself incapable of comprehending what becomes obvious to the reader: Kaine’s murder, indicative of slavery’s inherent violence, sets off a chain of events that leads to the coffle uprising. Nehemiah’s inability to comprehend that causal relationship and to see the revolt as a response to slaveholders’ brutality illustrates the impossibility of Dessa speaking freely to a man who would use her words to keep Dessa and her fellow bondspeople enslaved (*Dessa Rose*, 42, 45).

For Dessa, “memory stopped the day Emmalina met her as she had come out of the fields” (*Dessa Rose*, 58). Beyond that day, lies unspeakable pain—the “nightmare” of Kaine’s lifeless body, followed by Dessa’s retaliation toward the mistress, the mental and physical torture Dessa endured as punishment, her sale, and the coffle revolt for which she was sentenced to death. According to the narrator, Dessa returns to that moment where memory stopped, “again and again, recognizing it as dead, knowing there was no way to change it, arriving at it from various directions, refusing to move beyond it” (*Dessa Rose*, 58). Once though, Nemi’s questions “[drive] her into that desert” where Dessa “[sees] the blood and bits of pink flesh beneath her own fingernails, [feels] again the loose skin of Young Mistress’s neck...” (*Dessa Rose*, 59). With her repetitive return to the instant of Kaine’s death, her inability to move beyond that moment of loss, and the vivid sensory recall with which she relives the assault on Mistress, Dessa exhibits symptoms of trauma. Dessa’s silence, especially about what happened on the coffle or anything that happened after the loss of Kaine, correlates to her inability to move beyond that moment. The impossibility of Dessa’s talking freely to the man who would enslave her both literally and figuratively by his attempts to “read” her is compounded by Dessa’s painful confinement to her own memory. Even in the early days of their freedom, when Dessa and her compatriots sit around the campfire sharing stories about their enslaved past, Dessa remains silent. “That part of the past,” explains Williams, “lay sealed in the scars between her thighs” (*Dessa Rose*,

60).

In “The Lion’s History,” Williams recalls a conversation in which a colleague “who should have known better” asked why she had chosen to write about slavery. “Even some black people, a few,” she writes, “have asked why I would want to probe that old scar.” In Williams’s view, “Slavery...is more scab than scar on the nation’s body. It’s a wound that has not healed and, until the scab is removed, the festered flesh cut away, it cannot heal cleanly and completely.”<sup>53</sup> In the “The Lion’s History,” unhealed physical wounds symbolize slavery’s lasting effect on the nation. Even more directly in *Dessa Rose*, Williams relates physical wounds and scars to the memory of slavery. In addition to the master’s attempt to inscribe his power on Dessa’s body, the wounds Dessa suffers and the scars she bears are the physical traces of the experience Dessa refuses to discuss and that lies “sealed” in her physical scars.

Through the process of remembering “dreams and ghosts of dreams” in the cellar where she is held, Dessa—who at times is “almost overwhelmed by the story”—mourns for the loved ones now lost to her. “Always, whether her eyes were opened or closed,” writes Williams, “Kaine walked with her, or mammy. Jeeter tugged at her head-rag or Carrie Mae frowned her down about some little foolishness. ... They sat with her in the cellar. She grieved in this presence as she had not done since their loss” (*Dessa Rose*, 54). What she cannot remember or refuses to allow herself to remember are the events beyond the day Emmalina met her coming in from the fields to say that Kaine attacked master with a hoe, master beat Kaine with a shovel, and Kaine lay bleeding on their pallet. Suggesting Dessa’s enslavement to memory as much as to Nehemiah’s literacy, this recollection is only ever recounted, and thus mediated, by the white author in his journal and by Williams’s omniscient narrator, who speaks for Dessa in the early chapters.

Similarly, it is not Dessa but Nathan who tells of the torture she suffers after she assaults her

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<sup>53</sup> Williams, “The Lion’s History,” 248.

mistress. Nathan was enslaved to the trader who bought Dessa. He participated in the revolt and, at Dessa's insistence, evaded capture with another of their accomplices. After returning to free Dessa from the basement and helping to deliver her baby on the run, the fugitives find refuge with Ruth Sutton, whose home, in the absence of her gambler husband, has become a sanctuary for runaway slaves. After an unsettling argument with Dessa, who is still recovering from childbirth, Ruth confronts Nathan about the veracity of the account the group gave as they sought aid for Dessa and her newborn. He does not mention the coffle revolt or Dessa's imprisonment but recounts seeing her emerge from the sweatbox on the day the slave trader bought Dessa. The box, used to punish "willful" slaves, was constructed so that a person could not lie, sit, or stand but presumably only crouch in a painful in-between posture. With only a few holes bored through, Nathan explains, sweatboxes, on numerous occasions, functioned as death contraptions to the people who had suffocated inside them. "They whipped her, put her in that, let her sweat out in the sun," Nathan tells an incredulous Ruth, who notes that Dessa's back bears no mark of whipping (*Dessa Rose*, 134). Nathan replies that Dessa was lashed around her hips and branded inside her thighs. He tells how she came out of the box covered in blood and dirt, her face swollen, her shredded dress "hanging round her in tatters or else stuck in [her] wounds" (*Dessa Rose*, 134). Nathan's account emphasizes Dessa's strength. She surprised him by standing when he did not expect that she was able. "She picked her own self up and I know her skin must've been screaming," he tells Ruth. "But she didn't ask that white man for no mercy; not then, not ever that I knows of" (*Dessa Rose*, 134-135). Though Ruth concedes Nathan's account is an awful one, she continues to question the truth of it. Ruth will not believe the story until she sees Dessa's scars and only later recognizes how intrusive Dessa would find such an examination.

Ruth's suspicion is not limited to the tale of Dessa's torture; "to hear Ada tell it," Ruth reflects, "every runaway in the world was escaping from a 'cruel master,'" a claim Ruth considers incredible (*Dessa Rose*, 90). Ruth's disbelief reflects her own privileged upbringing but also suggests a larger

pattern of self-deception. Though she has been estranged from her family for four years, Ruth thinks of the separation only as having “lost touch” (*Dessa Rose*, 108). She also convinces herself that the debt that caused the falling-out could not be the enormous sum her mother claimed in her last letter. Ruth refuses to believe that she and her husband borrowed the \$5,000 her mother said they owed. Ruth realizes only belatedly what “Mammy” had managed to keep from her: Ruth’s husband, whose return is long overdue, is a gambler. Ruth’s house, with its unfinished second story and staircase that leads nowhere, is a testament to the Suttons’ unrealized planter aspirations and class pretense. Ruth’s own bondspeople have long since fled. With only the runaways on her property, she owes her survival and that of her children to the labor of fugitive ex-slaves. Though she does not own them, she expects them to address her as “Mistress” and thinks herself entitled to some “expression of gratitude” for allowing them to stay. Ruth, however, disbelieves Ada’s claim that she “escaped from a lecherous master who had lusted with her and then planned the seduction of Ada’s daughter” (*Dessa Rose*, 91). Ruth bases her insistence that “no white man would do that,” on a personal revulsion toward interracial sex. Mammy’s rebuttal that there “must be some way for high yeller to git like that” suggests the legibility of the master’s exploitation in the color of his children’s skin, but Ruth still refuses to believe Ada’s story and chastises her for fabricating lies.

Later, in the third section of the novel, Dessa the narrator reports the personal history Ada confides to her. The master who owned and sexually exploited Ada was her biological father. When he made known his intention to assault Ada’s twelve-year-old daughter, Annabelle, Ada determined that the two would run away (*Dessa Rose*, 175, 183). Suggesting the gross naiveté of Ruth’s response, Ada’s paternity and slave experience involve sexual predation by a master who also disregards cultural taboos against incest. The narrator’s clarification that Annabelle was not the master’s child, that the “only white on her had come from Ada” reiterates the notion that the white master’s sexual abuse of slave women is discernible in the skin color of the children born of those unions (*Dessa Rose*, 175).

As narrator, Dessa reprises Ada's history while relating the experience of slave women who are sexually coerced and whose reproductive capacity is commodified by slaveholders. When the ex-slave women at Sutton Glen object to the sexual relationship between Ruth and Nathan, Ned, one of the fugitive men, dismisses their concerns as jealousy. Under his breath, he mutters, "Don't nobody want no old mule like you" (*Dessa Rose*, 182). The insult prompts Dessa to consider how the treatment of enslaved women reduces them to the status of livestock. Dessa recounts the story of Milly, who bore seventeen children in eighteen years and had all of them taken from her when they were old enough to stop nursing. When Milly went two years without another pregnancy, she was "put outdoors." Flora's baby was taken from her and given to another woman to nurse so that Flora, who "could do much as any man in the fields" could return to fieldwork. According to Dessa, this is what prompted Flora to escape from slavery, "so she could keep her babies for herself." The narrating Dessa also remembers that "Janet was mistreated because she was barren" and that "Ada's master had belly-rubbed with her, then wanted to use her daughter." Of her own experience, she acknowledges, "I had been spared death till I could birth a baby white folks would keep slaved" (*Dessa Rose*, 183). Dessa's commentary on the sexual and reproductive exploitation of slave women reflects a shift in academic scholarship, which had begun to consider how the experience of slavery differed for men and women.

### **The Wound of Memory/Mammy is Nobody's Real Name**

For the epigraph of the novel's second section, Williams chooses a quotation attributed to ex-slave and activist Sojourner Truth, "I have plowed and planted and no man could head me..." (*Dessa Rose*, 73). This excerpt is taken from Frances Gage's account of Truth's speech at the 1851 Akron, Ohio, Women's Rights Convention. Gage, who presided over the convention, reported Truth's remarks as follows:

Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody eber help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place [and raising herself to her full height and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked], and ar'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! [And she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power.] I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'n't I a woman? <sup>54</sup>

The comments highlighted the double standards of gender identity for black and white women. Gage's account was included in the 1875 *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* and in the twentieth century was widely, if incorrectly, accepted as an accurate account of Truth's remarks. In his 1993 biography, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet Legend*, Carleton Mabree pointed out that Gage's account was first published in 1863, a full twelve years after the Akron Convention. Comparing Gage's version to twenty-seven other accounts published immediately after the convention, Mabree found not a single reference the famous "Ar'n't I a woman?" refrain in any of the 1851 reports. While it was common for orators to repeat the same speeches at different venues, Mabree found no mention of Truth reciting the famous refrain elsewhere, nor any evidence that she typically employed such "rhythmic repetition," in her speeches, though Gage often did. Supposing the refrain was a reworking of the antislavery motto "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?" Mabree posited that Gage "invented the powerful 'Ar'n't I a woman?' litany and imposed it on what Truth really said."<sup>55</sup>

Even if Sojourner Truth did not utter that famous phrase, the ideas embodied in Williams's epigraph apparently were included in Truth's speech in Akron. An 1851 account by Marius Robinson, who served as secretary of the convention, attributed the following remarks to Truth: "I have as much

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<sup>54</sup> Sojourner Truth, Olive Gilbert, and Frances W. Titus, 1875, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century; with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence, Drawn from Her "Book of Life"*. Documenting the American South, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth75/truth75.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Carleton Mabree with Susan Mabree Newhouse, "Her Famous Akron Speech," in *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), 67-82, 77.



muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man ...”<sup>56</sup> Based on this reported version of the speech, Nell Irvin Painter notes how Truth “demands rights for women by virtue of her own physical equality with men. Her experience as a worker validates her claim, and the work in question, as well as the criterion for equality—muscular strength—are masculine.”<sup>57</sup>

The myth surrounding Sojourner Truth’s Akron speech raises important questions about Sherley Anne Williams’s decision to excerpt Frances Gage’s version of the speech. Was Williams aware that it was most likely a fabrication and that Gage, not Truth, probably composed its most famous line? Truth, who never learned to read and write, had her life story told in two biographies. Both were written by white women with Truth’s input. Olive Gilbert wrote the 1850 *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*; Frances Titus produced the expanded 1875 edition, which included the Gage account.<sup>58</sup> However Williams understood its provenance, the epigraph for the novel’s second section relates *Dessa Rose* to a contemporary work of history that examines the conflicts of race and gender identity experienced by slave women.

Men and women experienced slavery differently. With that basic premise ignored by earlier studies of slavery, Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, along with Jacqueline Jones’s *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, began to explore the lives of slave women. While the enslavement of both men and women revolved around the labor they performed for masters, women’s work, White writes, “was

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<sup>56</sup> Marius Robinson, *Salem Anti-Slavery Bugle*, June 7, 1851, reprinted in Mabee, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend*, 81-82 and Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 125-26.

<sup>57</sup> Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, 126.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

concerned with bearing, nourishing, and rearing children whom slaveholders needed for the continual replenishment of the labor force.”<sup>59</sup> For women, slavery was largely defined by the prevalent threat of sexual assault, the commodification of their ability to reproduce and increase the master’s human property, and the responsibility for childcare.<sup>60</sup> White also traces the development of the most prominent cultural stereotypes regarding black women. The promiscuous Jezebel figure was the product of a system that exposed and commodified the bodies of slave women. Sapphire, the image of masculine women, emerged after emancipation. Most relevant to *Dessa Rose*, White explains the stereotype of Mammy. Consistent with the Victorian ideal of womanhood, Mammy was “a woman completely dedicated to the white family, especially to the children of that family. She was the house servant who was given complete charge of domestic management. She served also as friend and advisor. She was, in short, surrogate mistress and mother.”<sup>61</sup> White notes, however, “There was room for black women in the Victorian tradition only to the extent that Mammy’s energies were expended on whites.”<sup>62</sup> The Mammy myth became important to slaveholders as they increasingly defended the institution by casting it as a “positive good” for the enslaved. As White explains, the caricature of Mammy “helped endorse the service of black women in Southern households, as well as the close contact between whites and blacks.”<sup>63</sup>

In *Dessa Rose*, Williams places that myth at the center of a dispute that forces Ruth to reconsider her relationship to Dorcas, the woman Ruth knew as her beloved Mammy.<sup>64</sup> Observing the

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<sup>59</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 69.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 56, 49.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>64</sup> For an additional reading of Dessa and Ruth’s argument and the novel’s representation of Mammy, see also Ashraf H. A.

young fugitive Dessa, who is still recovering from childbirth, Ruth recalls that Mammy had not known her date of birth but refused the birthday—Valentine’s Day—that Ruth had arbitrarily chosen for her. As Ruth’s consciousness shifts from that recollection to the narrative present, Williams describes her as “rushing from the wound of that memory,” a phrase that aptly evokes the linguistic origin of trauma, the Greek word for wound. For Dessa, the wound of memory encompasses the fatal injuries of Kaine, whose death she cannot move beyond; Dessa’s own physical scars; and an experience she cannot narrate. For Ruth, the wound of memory is located first in the death of the woman Dorcas and later in the loss of the idealized memory of Mammy. Yet the loss of Mammy is a wound that Dessa also bears. While her sale physically separates Dessa from her biological mother, Dessa also recollects the deterioration of her mother’s psychological health—the cumulative effect of the emotional traumas slavery inflicts on Rose. Dessa and Ruth’s subsequent argument over “Mammy” and who holds the rightful claims to her affections embodies nothing less than the politics of memory and the proprietorship of historical narrative.

The argument erupts as Ruth reminisces aloud about her youth and speaks frequently of her “Mammy,” by whom she means the well-traveled and highly-trained lady’s maid her father purchased when Ruth was thirteen. Ruth’s mother insisted on calling her “Mammy” because, she said, it gave the impression that the slave woman had been with the family for a long time. The mere appearance of a slave woman’s longstanding devotion, the mistress suggests, was a reflection of social status for the family who owned “Mammy.” From Ruth’s early teenage years until the bondswoman’s recent death, “Mammy” had been a trusted confidant to the charge she called “Rufel.” Before her argument with Dessa, Ruth has no reason to doubt that the affection between her and “Mammy” was anything but genuine. As Ruth prattles on about the social events of her youth, Dessa knows that the Mammy of

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Rushdy, “Reading Mammy: The Subject of Relation in Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*,” *African American Review* 27, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 365-389.

whom she speaks is the slave woman who died. Dessa even assumes, though incorrectly, that the woman had nursed Ruth from infancy, just as Dessa's sister Carrie had nursed the baby of their mistress. Ruth discounts the slaves' stories of abusive masters, based on little more than a misplaced belief in the integrity of slaveholders. Dessa, however, disputes Ruth's relationship with Mammy, based on her own family's experience of slavery. The obvious distress her challenge provokes in Ruth only encourages further antagonism from Dessa, who declares, "You don't even know Mammy" (*Dessa Rose*, 118).

Superficially, the conversation appears to devolve into a juvenile quarrel, with Dessa stubbornly refusing to admit that they are talking about two different women; but the confused identity of "Mammy" involves a much weightier conflict between a slave woman's presumed obligations to the people who own her and the incursion of those obligations into the bondwoman's familial relationships. In her attempts to resolve the confusion, Ruth insists, "My, my—*My* Mammy," but her proprietary assertion only angers Dessa, who assures herself that just as the mistress's child had never replaced Carrie's baby, "no white girl" could have supplanted Dessa in her own mother's affections. Dessa contends, "You ain't got no 'mammy'" (*Dessa Rose*, 118). Insisting that Mammy is her own mother, Rose, of Vaugham plantation, Dessa disputes Ruth's claim to Mammy's affections and to Mammy herself. Effectively liberating slave women from the stereotype Ruth imposes as white charge and mistress, Dessa tells her, "'Mammy ain't nobody name, not they real one.'" Dessa maintains that Mammy, her mother, has a name and children of her own. Ruth's contention that "Mammy just had me! I was like her child" reveals a naïve, if not delusional, belief in a fictive kinship that Dessa ultimately undermines. The argument compels Ruth to consider how the claims Dessa bases on her own mother's experience also apply to Dorcas. The suggestion that Dorcas—whose real name Ruth only recalls with considerable effort—may have had a child of her own evokes an irreconcilable conflict between the memory of the woman, the mother, epitomized by Rose and the myth of the

maternal “Mammy,” who repudiates all family ties and all claims to individuality as she devotes herself to the master’s children.

The fight with Dessa leaves Ruth feeling “as if the wench had taken her beloved Mammy and put a stranger in her place” (*Dessa Rose*, 128).<sup>65</sup> First, in remembering the name Dorcas, Ruth recalls how the woman’s name was changed to Mammy. The appellation was meant to suggest affective attachments that did not exist at the time but that Ruth insists did develop, truly and freely, between her and the woman she elevated to the status of maternal surrogate. She recalls that hearing Mammy speak the name Rufel, was “to know herself loved,” though she later supposes that this name change might have been Dorcas’s retaliation for the alteration of her name to the artificial “Mammy” (*Dessa Rose*, 124, 129). Ruth alternates between her belief in Mammy’s love for her and recognition of “how absurd it was” to think herself Mammy’s child, a fantasy that casts her as the equal of slave children. Considering Mammy in racialized terms, Ruth thinks, “Mammy was a slave, a nigger,” then explains their formal relationship aloud, “She was my maid...my personal servant.” Internally, Ruth rejects those social constructions, thinking, “But Mammy was my friend.” She then experiences embarrassment over her “recoil” from that “cherished memory” (*Dessa Rose*, 125). As she interrogates her knowledge of Dorcas, Ruth realizes that as a maid in France, Dorcas would have been free; yet she returned with her mistress to the United States and a life of bondage. One explanation, Ruth decides, is that “she would have returned if she had a child” (*Dessa Rose*, 129). Feeling “chagrined by her own ignorance” of the woman she considered a friend, Ruth inquires what the fugitives know of Dorcas’s background. From Nathan, she learns what the other runaways believe to be Dorcas’s personal history, but the information is in no way certain, as “Dorcas didn’t just sit down and tell no one her life story.” She was from Virginia and “maybe she had a couple of kids,” but the people who owned her moved or traveled so

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<sup>65</sup> As Marta E. Sánchez notes, “Dessa forces Rufel into experiencing mammy’s subjectivity, not as expressive of a function put as a person with a family and feelings.” Sánchez, “The Estrangement Effect in Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*,” 30.

much, it was “doubtful Dorcas even know her own children, if she had any” (*Dessa Rose*, 137).

Ultimately, the destruction of the myth of Mammy and Ruth’s reevaluation of her relationship to Dorcas leads to an important admission. Though she wants “desperately to believe that Mammy had loved her not only fully, but freely as well,” Ruth feels herself “almost...personally responsible for Mammy’s pain, personally connected to it, not as the soother of hurt as Mammy had always been for her, but as the source of that pain” (*Dessa Rose*, 138).

Meanwhile for Dessa, the fight over “Mammy” relates to the emotional and psychological injuries her mother suffered under slavery. As Dessa drifts in and out of consciousness in her childbed, she confuses dream and reality. She mistakes the strange white woman, Ruth, for a figment of her unconscious and dreams of asking her mother to interpret the experience, to “read” her dream of the white woman. But as Williams explains, “it was so hard to get mammy to talk some sense.” The grief of repeated loss—of a husband who was killed and children who either died or were sold—exacts a terrible toll on Rose. As she appears in her daughter’s dream, Rose offers no insight to help Dessa understand Ruth’s presence. In response to her daughter’s query, Rose compulsively recites her catalogue of dream interpretation and folk wisdom. “Grief had her bowed down,” Dessa recalls of her mother, and “Mammy had to talk”: “‘To dream of death is a sign of marriage.’ ... ‘A dream of marriage is a sign of death. ... Never tell a dream until you broke your fast...’” (*Dessa Rose*, 83, 84, 85).

Amid her attempts to have her dream read, Dessa remembers herself in Mammy’s company in the dairy as a much younger child. She recalls the thumping of the churn and Mammy’s singing “This Little Light of Mine” as the child Dessa rocked, hardly noticing the wagon lumbering into the yard. “Someone had come running, shouting,” she remembers. “Mammy had jumped up screaming, knocked over the churn, and slipped and slid in the soft butter and yellowed cream, and screaming had run behind the wagon and the pine box that knocked against the wagon sides” (*Dessa Rose*, 85). The pine

box apparently carried Dessa's father, the Pappy she did not recall as a coherent figure, only as "a prickly cheek against her own small hand, a wide chest against her knees, hard arms supporting her bottom..." (*Dessa Rose*, 83). Dessa's conflation of traumatic memory and dream, which she confuses with reality, suggests the blurring of past and present, of conscious and unconscious recollection. Dessa relives her traumatic past and repeats it without volition, just as Rose, in her grief and compulsion, cannot engage with her daughter in the aftermath of her partner's death or in Dessa's dream.

For Dessa, Ruth's claims to Mammy represent the slaveholder's claim to power over the slave woman—over Dessa's mother Rose and over Dessa herself. It is a power that expropriates children, decimates families, kills partners, and leaves one "bowed down" with grief. While Dessa argues that Ruth's lack of knowledge about Mammy's name and children invalidates Ruth's claim to her, Dessa proves her own knowledge by recounting the losses suffered by her mother. Her recitation also constitutes the oral history of their family. Dessa speaks aloud the names of children dead and sold, lest the names of Rose's "poor, lost children die to living memory as they had in her world" (*Dessa Rose*, 119). Much like Rose's habit of repeating the names until "speech became too painful," Dessa becomes so absorbed in recounting the names and fates of her lost siblings that she does not notice Ruth's departure and continues her narration through the din of both her newborn and Ruth's baby crying.

Dessa's recitation of Rose's children highlights the relationship between memory and oral history, as well as the importance of naming. Speaking the names of Rose's "poor lost children" keeps them alive in memory yet also replays the loss, until speech and its requisite act of remembering become too painful for the elder Rose. In repeating the names, just as Rose told them to her, Dessa's speech act functions as a memorial not only to Rose's lost children but to the mother now lost to Dessa. It also reveals that Dessa bears the name of her oldest sister, also named Rose for their mother, after whom Minta was born but only lived a short while. Seth survived to work in the fields but was eventually sold. Little Rose died of diphtheria while Mammy was carrying Amos, who only lived a

week and seemed to have “blighted the womb.” Not another lived until after the birth of Bess, the sickly little girl who was left behind when Rose followed her mistress into marriage; the child died before the mother reached her destination. Then came Samuel, who was also sold. He was named for his father but called Jeeter (for Junior) by Carrie Mae, the last child Rose has left. Dessa prays her mother might be spared the pain of separation from Carrie Mae. The family history suggests added significance for the protagonist’s middle name, each utterance of which evokes the long painful narration and the memory of familial loss that begins and ends with a child named Rose.

Dessa’s recitation and recollections suggest a similarity between the elder Rose’s experiences and Dessa’s own traumatic losses. Dessa’s remembrance of her father’s death parallels the story of Emmalina running to meet Dessa as she left the fields. Kaine’s death, Williams explains, is the point at which memory stopped for Dessa, who notably rejects the suggestion to name her baby Kaine. Attesting once again to the importance of naming and its power to conjure the past, Dessa refuses to relive the loss of her partner in the name of her child: “The baby’s daddy, like that part of her life, was dead; she would not rake it up each time she called her son’s name” (*Dessa Rose*, 148).

The name Dessa ultimately chooses for her son is no less significant; according to the compromise Ruth proposes to honor both parents and the men who made possible his free birth, the baby is named Desmond Kaine, but affectionately called “Mony” by his mother, who considers him “to be as good as gold” (*Dessa Rose*, 148). Much like Dessa’s and Ruth’s insistence on their own names, the nickname Dessa chooses for her son signals her resistance of slaveholder power. Phonetically, Mony (read Money) evokes currency, and thus the commodification of Dessa and her child in slavery. The derivation, from Desmond, however, suggests a different meaning that negates their former chattel status. While celebrating the baby’s free birth, Mony suggests an intangible value—the mother’s estimation of her child and the personal cost to Dessa to ensure her baby was born free.



### **“I Never Will Forget Nemi Trying To Read Me.”**

The third section, in which Dessa assumes the first-person narration, begins just after her discovery of the sexual relationship between Nathan and Ruth. Dessa reacts to Nathan and Ruth as though their relationship is a personal affront to her. At the discovery, Dessa promptly moves to the slave quarters. As Williams later explained in an interview, the sexual relationships between white women and black men had been “one of the sore points in relations between black women and white women”; Williams wanted to explore such a relationship from the prospective of a black woman to discover if, despite the friction, “mutual respect could develop.”<sup>66</sup> Discounting the notion that Dessa reacts out of jealousy, Williams asserted that “circumstances in the novel perfectly justify Dessa’s attitude.” “Why,” she asked, “would you want somebody whom you love whether it is sexual or platonic or whatever way, intimately involved with somebody you hate and think is no good?”<sup>67</sup> Recalling how she had comforted Cully when he cried over never knowing his mother and how he, Harker, and Nathan had bonded over all the things they talked about as Dessa lay in childbed, Dessa cannot believe that one of the men “could be so ignorant to something that hurt me so bad.” As she explains, “white woman was everything I feared and hated, and it hurt me that one of them would want to love with her” (*Dessa Rose*, 169). When Nathan asks Dessa why she is so angry, she feels he should already know, particularly since she told him what their master did to Kaine and he saw Dessa come out of the sweatbox. “White folks had taken everything in the world from me except my baby and my life and they had tried to take them,” explains Dessa. “And to see him, who had helped to save me, had friended with me through so much of it, laying up, wallowing in what had hurt me so—I didn’t feel that nothing I could say would tell him what that pain was like” (*Dessa Rose*, 173). Dessa’s feelings toward

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<sup>66</sup> Jordan, *Broken Silences*, 293.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 294.

Ruth are complicated by the fact that she must rely on Ruth to nurse Mony. “It hurt me to my deepest heart not to nurse my baby,” Dessa recalls. “Made me shamed, like I was less than a woman. And to have him nursing on her...Oh, I accepted it. Wasn’t no choice; but I never did like to see it. And she act like this wasn’t no more to her than nursing her own child” (Dessa Rose, 170).

In this final section, Ruth, Dessa, and the men who freed her from her basement prison, conspire in a money-making scheme conceived by Harker to finance a move west. Inspired by a con Harker routinely carried out with his former master, Ruth poses as the mistress and legal owner who sells her black accomplices. Once the bargain is complete and the buyer’s money collected, the newly sold “slave” takes the first opportunity to run away and rejoin his co-conspirators. The plan is slightly reminiscent of the fraud Rosa Millard perpetrates against the U.S. Army in *The Unvanquished* to succor widows and orphans of Confederate soldiers. In Williams’s novel, though, the marks are always the buyers and owners of slaves and, by extension, the slave economy.

Initially, Dessa opposes the plan and is reluctant to trust her freedom to any white person (Dessa Rose, 172). “We all knowed they was wicked and treacherous—that’s why we was in the position we was in,” says Dessa. Though she understands Harker’s argument that her earlier experiences should not necessarily influence the current situation, Dessa insists she wants no part of the scheme (Dessa Rose, 182). She also resents Ruth’s response to the story of Dessa’s torture. Ruth’s demand to see the scars as proof that the story is true places her, in Dessa’s estimation, on par with potential buyers who subject bondspeople to degrading physical inspections. According to the narrating Dessa, the first thought that occurs to her when she learns Ruth wants to see her scars is that “Miz Lady had to *see* the goods before she would buy the story” (Dessa Rose, 189).

Williams’s epigraph for the third section, lyrics from Taj Mahal’s “Cajun Waltz,” foreshadow

the scene in which Harker, speaking French, asks Dessa to dance.<sup>68</sup> As Dessa relates the prospect of a romantic relationship with Harker and his plans to earn enough money to migrate out of slavery territory, she also narrates some of her experience in the sweatbox. While this is the first time she directly comments on that torture, it is important to remember that it is not the Dessa of the novel's narrative present—the new mother who recently escaped slavery—who relates the experience. Dessa the narrator, the grandmother of the epilogue, tells of the sweatbox and only after so much time has passed that Mony has grown to adulthood and has children of his own. Her account echoes Douglass's description of the bestialization he felt under the authority of Edward Covey and also anticipates the language of wounds, scars, and abject filth that would re-emerge in Civil War novels of the 1990s. "I had cried a long time in that box, from pain, from grief, from filth," Dessa recalls. It was an experience, she explains, that "[does] something to you, to have to lay up in filth...Laying up there in my own foulment made me know how low I was. And I cried. I was like an animal; whipped like one; in the dirt like one. I hasn't never known peoples could do peoples like this" (*Dessa Rose*, 191). As Dessa's narration turns to the physical markings where her skin was lacerated by the whip, she suggests how this evidence of slavery's physical violence also signifies the psychological experience for the enslaved: "It wasn't uncommon to see a negro with scars and most of us carried far more than we ever showed."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Here, Harker also explains that the word "negress," which serves as the title of the section, is French for "black woman." The two earlier chapters "The Darky" and "The Wench," suggest Dessa's race and gender identity but are derogatory terms applied by Nehemiah and Ruth. The French translation "black woman" simply states Dessa's race and gender identity, free of the pejorative connotations of the earlier chapter titles. On the significance of section titles, Deborah McDowell similarly writes, "Whereas [Nehemiah's] section is entitled 'Darky' —a gender-neutral nomination — Rufel's is titled 'Wench,' a female-specific nomination, but one no closer to naming Dessa Rose"; McDowell, "Witnessing Slavery after Freedom—Dessa Rose," 151.

<sup>69</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin notes how Dessa's scars make her feel "unattractive" but also "disabled." Griffin relates Dessa's sense of unattractiveness to Ned's calling black women "mules," a characterization that, Griffin notes, also evokes Nanny's declaration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see." Griffin, who is concerned with how novels of slavery portray the erotic as a site of resistance, writes of Dessa and Harker's intimacy, "Sensual and erotic touch between a black man and black woman appears to serve as an act of healing and affirmation. Her [Dessa's] scars are redefined as a site of desire." Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Textual Healing: Claiming Black

Dessa reluctantly agrees to participate in Harker's scheme but initially finds the prospect of selling free people back into slavery terrifying; as the group repeats their scam, however, it changes their relation to each other and to slavery. Early on, their host at a plantation where the group stops overnight attempts a drunken assault on Ruth. After Dessa helps to fend off the attack, she realizes that the threat of sexual assault exists for white women and black women alike. That night, she lies awake pondering the realization that "the white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me." Dessa the narrator says she did not know white men "could use a white woman like that, just take her by force same as they could with us" (*Dessa Rose*, 201). Her astonishment continues onto the next page, where she acknowledges that Ruth "was as helpless in this as I was, [and] that our only protection was ourselves and each others" (*Dessa Rose*, 202). This understanding and shared secret of the night's events effects a more amicable relation between the women. A general sense of camaraderie emerges in the group at large, as the conspirators repeat their swindle in numerous Southern towns.

Early in the novel, Nehemiah discovers that Dessa's former owners tried to deceive potential buyers by concealing the scars of her whipping and branding; in the slave sale scheme, the conspirators appropriate and manipulate the system that once reduced them to property. They exploit the expectations of buyers and turn the system back on itself, profiting from the very economy that formerly exploited and profited from their labor. "Oh, I tell you, honey," says the narrating Dessa, "slavery was ugly and we felt right to soak the masters for all we could get" (*Dessa Rose*, 206). Though Ruth initially only sells the conspirators as field laborers, she eventually exacts higher sale prices by claiming the bondspeople possess whatever skills and experience the buyers appear to require. She also proves herself a canny negotiator by using her baby to distract buyers while she exacts more favorable terms and closes the sale. The conspirators, whose true relationship is incomprehensible to the larger

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Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery," *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 530, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299218>.

slaveholding society, perform the roles the system otherwise expects of them. Ruth acts the part of a vulnerable young mother. As Clara's nurse, Dessa plays the part of the stereotypical "Mammy," and the others who freed themselves from slavery become slaves again, though only temporarily. By playing to the expectations of the buyers, this band of fugitives and a peculiar white widow exact a monetary remuneration from the system that for most of their lives relegated them to the gendered and racialized roles that they now only perform as fiction. Their theatricality affords a sense of empowerment over the system. As narrator Dessa explains, "What we used to do with fear and trembling we now did for fun. I told myself this was good, that it showed slavery didn't have no hold on us no more" (*Dessa Rose*, 213). Williams casts her company in the tradition of the trickster. In *Give Birth to Brightness*, she writes, "the black trickster knowingly crashes against the conventions and wrests his own versions of right from a system which condemns his every effort toward dignity and self-assertion as moral or legal wrongs."<sup>70</sup>

Dessa's narration of the sale scheme also suggests how the subversion of slaveholding power facilitates an important phase of the grief process. The night of the averted assault, Dessa says she "accepted that everyone I loved was gone." Acknowledging "That life was dead to me; I'd held the wake for it in that cellar," Dessa says the bed, where she eventually identifies with Ruth over their shared danger, is both "grave and birthing place to me" (*Dessa Rose*, 197). Frederick Douglass, whom Williams evokes in the first section, achieves his figurative resurrection from social death through his physical resistance of Covey. Dessa's regenerative experience occurs the night she and Ruth battle Oscar. Dessa's unlikely alliance with Ruth becomes the catalyst for her metaphysical transformation, which she notably expresses in the language of childbearing.

Relating her surprise that white women face the threat of assault, Dessa insists she "never will forget the fear" she feels when Ruth calls on her to fight off Ruth's attacker (*Dessa Rose*, 202). Dessa's

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<sup>70</sup> Williams, *Give Birth to Brightness*, 66.

narration returns to this event, but each subsequent reference demonstrates how Dessa and Ruth divest the experience of its menacing quality by making the episode the object of humor. In her account, Dessa recalls, “We even laughed about that bad Oscar one night” (*Dessa Rose*, 206). Later “when Miz Lady brought up about me and her beating that bad Oscar with pillows, it was more or less to keep the joke going. By this time, Oscar was more funny to us than scary.” After declaring herself free of slavery’s hold, Dessa recalls, “Even me and Miz Lady had got in on the act with that bad Oscar.” In Arcopolis, as they recount “comical things that happened on the trail,” and as Ruth mocks some of the white people they encounter, they also “[laugh] some more about that bad Oscar” (*Dessa Rose*, 210, 212). In another episode, one of Nathan’s buyers sends him to the sheriff’s office with a note for Nathan to be whipped. Nathan stops a white man and asks him to read the note, then stops the next black man he sees and gives him two pennies to deliver the note to the sheriff and receive his reply.<sup>71</sup> “This wasn’t a nice trick,” Dessa admits, “but it was what slavery had taught a lot of people: to take everybody so you didn’t get took yourself.” Explaining how the accomplices “laughed so we wouldn’t cry,” Dessa says they were seeing themselves “as we had been” and seeing what had made them. “Only way we could defend ourselves,” says Dessa, “was by making it into some hair-raising story or a joke” (*Dessa Rose*, 208). With humor and interracial camaraderie, Dessa and her companions destabilize the power structure of their slave society, enabling Dessa’s pronouncement that “slavery didn’t have no hold on us no more” (*Dessa Rose*, 213). That declaration, however, serves an ominous foreshadowing of the novel’s climactic scene.

Even in their most congenial moments, Dessa remains guarded about her past. During the conversations in Arcopolis, Ruth asks Dessa about the coffle and her escape from the root cellar. Though Dessa confides some details about how she was chained and about the slaves’ singing, Dessa refuses to talk about Kaine and the loss of her family. As she explains, “These was still a wound to me

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<sup>71</sup> A similar incident occurs in the antebellum slave narrative authored by William Wells Brown.

and remembrance of that coffer hurt only a little bit less” (*Dessa Rose*, 216). Where Williams’s phrase “the wound of that memory,” referring to Ruth’s recollection of “Mammy,” prefaces the women’s earlier argument, here Dessa’s reference to psychological wounds prefaces conversations in which she and Ruth discuss Rose and Dorcas without the earlier hostility. Yet Dessa qualifies their relationship as she notes that throughout the journey she never forgets that Ruth is a white woman (*Dessa Rose*, 216-217). Deborah E. McDowell explains Dessa’s refusal to talk about her past as a form of resistance—she controls her story by refusing to “confess” to Nehemiah and Ruth—but also as “a means of containing her pain by forgetting the past.” McDowell relates Dessa’s silence to a larger trope in African American novels that “links getting ‘beyond’ slavery to remembering it, paradoxically burying it and bearing it...”<sup>72</sup> While Dessa’s silence does operate on multiple levels, it is difficult to reconcile the notion of containment-through-forgetting with Dessa’s statement in the epilogue that she has her story written down, specifically as a safeguard against a faulty cognitive memory. Dessa’s insistence that her story be recorded in writing in a narrative she controls, like her earlier, reflexive recitation of family history, suggests a determined campaign against forgetting. Perhaps then, it is not that Dessa sees forgetting as a way of containing her pain but that Dessa the narrator feels differently about the “wound,” or trauma of enslavement, than does the narrated Dessa, for whom some events remain unspeakable as she only begins to work through those aspects of her experience.

Despite the women’s more genial relation, Ruth’s proposal of moving west with the company of ex-slaves renews Dessa’s old anger. During their recent travels, all the participants remain in character, which, according to Dessa, makes it “easy to forget there was something more between them two” (*Dessa Rose*, 218). The narrating Dessa says her greatest fear during their travels through the South is that Ruth will speak out against the treatment of slaves and draw attention to their company. The unstated implication is that Dessa fears the consequences for everyone if Ruth accompanies them to

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<sup>72</sup> McDowell, “Witnessing Slavery after Freedom–Dessa Rose,” 155.

their destination and lives openly in a relationship with Nathan. The prospect leads to another spat. Dessa censors herself and says it is not her place to speak further against Ruth traveling with them. Ruth insists she is unconcerned with “place”; she is “talking friends,” though she screams her reply from behind a closed door after Dessa has already fled under the pretense of an errand to buy pastries.

Ruth’s suggestion of friendship is at least as astonishing to Dessa as her earlier realization about their shared vulnerability to the power of white patriarchy. What Ruth proposes, Dessa reflects, is a relationship like what she had with the slave Martha and her sister Carrie. That possibility leaves her admittedly “shaken” (*Dessa Rose*, 219). As she contemplates Ruth’s statement en route the bakeshop, however, she hears someone call, “Odessa.” First believing he has confused her with someone else who has the same name, Dessa realizes she knows the man as the one who interviewed her while she awaited the birth of her child and execution. Dessa’s insistence that she is not the woman for whom Nehemiah searches suggests the fluidity of identity. Much as Dessa acknowledges that the Ruth she encountered at the beginning of the summer “wasn’t the one I partnered with on that journey,” Dessa is not the same woman who was chained in the root cellar (*Dessa Rose*, 219). More importantly, Dessa’s insistence that he has mistaken her for someone else is a refusal to be Nehemiah’s Odessa, with all the “objectification” and “otherness” the “O” implies.

Dessa attempts to flee but is knocked unconscious by someone on the street alerted by Nehemiah’s cries of “Stop her...dangerous criminal, reward” (*Dessa Rose*, 220). She comes to at the jail, where she maintains that she does not know her accuser, whose own credibility has been considerably diminished after several earlier misidentifications. The sheriff, weary of Nehemiah “kidnapping” women off the street, is reluctant to repeat the exercise of having the woman undressed and searched for the fugitive’s identifying scars. When Ruth arrives claiming to be Dessa’s mistress, a quick pat signals to Ruth that Dessa is still wearing the money belt she forgot to remove before leaving the hotel. Ruth confides to the sheriff that her slave is wearing the belt that, according to her cover



story, contains a large sum for the hire of field laborers. Ruth says she cannot afford to have Dessa undressed before an audience. Accommodating her request for discretion, the sheriff summons Chloe, an elderly slave with bad eyesight, who inspects Dessa for scars behind a makeshift curtain. Dessa whispers that she was severely burned about the legs as a child and is ashamed of those scars, then slips Chloe the quarter she had intended to use to buy pastries. Instead, the coin, which is likely swindled from slave buyers, assures Chloe's complicity in undermining Nehemiah. Chloe runs her fingers over the unmarked flesh of Dessa's back and declares no evidence of whipping, thereby exonerating Dessa.

Refusing to accept the verdict, Nehemiah rebukes the sheriff for "taking the word of some nearsighted mammy" and demands, "Let me see for myself," before the sheriff physically removes him to the next room, saying, "Nemi, you out of your mind? Leave that gal alone" (*Dessa Rose*, 230). Indeed, Dessa herself questions the rationality of the "crazy white man" who has been "tracking [her] all cross the country like he owned [her]" and who has taken it upon himself to make sure she does not remain free. She notes how Nemi neglects his formerly neat dress. In addition to his bizarre, obsessive behavior, his disheveled appearance is what first gives Dessa hope that she might avoid re-enslavement. The sheriff, Dessa feels sure, "couldn't take the word of no white man like that, not against the word of a respectable white lady" (*Dessa Rose*, 224).<sup>73</sup> As Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu explains, Ruth undermines Nemi "largely in her ability to conform to and manipulate societal dictates concerning how a lady should behave."<sup>74</sup> By doing so, Ruth is able to "position herself in such a way that the

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<sup>73</sup> In her reading of this passage, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu also notes that like Dessa, the sheriff addresses Nehemiah as "Nemi," and also "seems to treat him disdainfully." Though the sheriff may indeed call Nehemiah by the same diminutive Dessa employs, the sheriff's usage may also stem from the fact that Dessa is the narrator. As she explains a few pages later, even dialogue that appears as a direct quotation in the text is not necessarily an exact account of the conversation but Dessa's reconstruction of events. Thus, the sheriff's use of the name Nemi, is probably a function of Dessa exercising narrative control over this episode. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

sheriff must abide by the unwritten code that governs a Southern gentleman's conduct."<sup>75</sup> Dessa performs a similar feat when she persuades the sheriff to summon Ruth in the first place. After Dessa regains consciousness at the jail, she pleads with the sheriff to have her mistress, Miz Carlisle (Ruth's alias), vouch for her identity. As Nehemiah demands to examine Dessa's body for scars, he calls for removing her dress and letting her prove she is not the wanted fugitive. Presumably after the commotion in the streets, several other men congregate at the jail, and, according to Dessa, "all of them seemed to like that notion" (*Dessa Rose*, 222).<sup>76</sup> Dessa, however, manipulates the sheriff's expectations of how a slaveowner would respond to the mistreatment of her human chattel. Dessa, "scared to death" at the way they ogle her, cries "Ware the goods!" Without knowing the full meaning of the phrase, she recalls that whenever a slave woman intended for the "fancy trade" was added to the coffle, that cry would go up as a warning and "only the trader would touch her" (*Dessa Rose*, 222). The phrase evokes the sexual commodification of the slave women, whose prices on the slave market are contingent on their perceived desirability as concubines. Dessa averts an examination with a warning that to the white men suggests "I might belong to someone [who would] be upset about damaged goods" (*Dessa Rose*, 222). The sheriff's immediate response—telling Nemi, "you had your last peep show in here," and ordering the other men to clear out—suggests that in the earlier cases, the slave

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>76</sup> Nehemiah's demand and Dessa's response recalls another well-known incident involving Sojourner Truth, as told by abolitionist William Hayward. Truth lectured at an anti-slavery meeting in Silverlake, Indiana, where supporters of slavery tried to discredit the speaker by circulating a rumor that Truth was a man dressed as a woman. A doctor in the audience, described as the "mouthpiece" of pro-slavery Democrats demanded that she submit to a physical examination by some of the women present. The doctor called for a vote, received a strong affirmative response, and did not call for a negative vote. By Hayward's account, Sojourner Truth responded to her critics by declaring that "her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring," but that those white babies were "far more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be." She asked the men "if they, too wished to suck" as she disrobed before the entire assembly and admonished her detractors that "it was not to her shame that she uncovered her breast before them, but to their shame." As Nell Irvin Painter writes of this exchange, Truth reversed the confrontation by infantilizing her critics, disparaging their masculinity and reconfiguring the "all-too-common exhibition of an undressed black body, with its resonance of the slave auction that undressed women for sale"; "Proslavery in Indiana," letter of William Hayward, Silver Lake, Kosciusko Co., Indiana, Oct. 1, 1858, printed in *The Liberator* (Boston), October, 15, 1858; also see letter from Hayward, *Northern Indianian* (Warsaw, IN), Oct. 8, 1858; Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 140.

women had in fact been subjected to a degrading, public examination. Dessa, however, manipulates the sheriff's anxieties about mistreating a slaveowner's property in order to summon her purported mistress. While Ruth's intervention shows the glaring contradictions in her society's code of conduct toward black and white women, Ruth, just as Dessa intends, makes the most of her society's regard for a "respectable white lady." With Chloe's cooperation, the women subvert the slaveholding authority Nemi represents.

As Dessa recounts the episode at the jail, she also recalls the interviews that open the novel and for the first time narrates those conversations in her own voice. At the farm where she was held prisoner, Nehemiah behaved, according to Dessa, as if "he had all the time in the world and might lend me a little if I would talk." She talked to him, she says, because "I'd had to say something to get out that cellar" (*Dessa Rose*, 225). In the Arcopolis jail, Dessa can't remember all of what she said to Nemi on the farm; she thinks her comments had only been about Kaine but fears it must have been more since she can't think of another reason he would "track me down like he owned me, like a bloodhound on my trail" (*Dessa Rose*, 225). As the narrating Dessa recounts the confrontation in the jail, she relays the conversation of Nemi, the sheriff, and Ruth in direct quotations, but then explains that the words are not exact because "I can't put my words together like they did. But I understood right on, now; wasn't nothing wrong with my understanding." As he tells an exaggerated tale of her past, what Nemi means, says Dessa, is "I was something so terrible I wasn't even human" (*Dessa Rose*, 227). Nemi's accusations are vaguely grounded in Dessa's personal history, but his story is filled with gross fabrications. Exaggerating Dessa's commission of violence, he claims she stabbed her master and strangled her mistress. Probably based on her knowledge of herbal contraceptives, he ascribes to her a supernatural power, claiming she "conjured" white men and "called up the devil" while she was shackled in the cellar. His most baseless charges attempt to cast Dessa in the stereotype of the promiscuous Jezebel, who "lusted" with her master and "laid with all the 'bucks' on the coffle"

(*Dessa Rose*, 228). For all of that, proof of which he claims to have recorded in his book, Nemi pronounces Dessa “a danger to womanhood” (*Dessa Rose*, 228). Even after Chloe declares she observes no scars, Nehemiah still insists Dessa is the fugitive in question and produces the notepad that contains his record of their conversations. Dessa recalls that when she learned he was writing her words, she “turned cold,” even in the summer heat. Seeing the book, she says, “made me fear him all over again” (*Dessa Rose*, 231). As he flips through the unbound pages and shakes the book in Dessa’s face, Ruth’s baby Clara, who as Beaulieu also notes, “has a hand in challenging Nehemiah’s authority” knocks it out of his grasp. As he collects the scattered pages and thrusts them at the sheriff and Ruth, the sheriff finds the writing unintelligible and declares the pages contain “nothing but some scribbling.” Ruth’s pages are blank (*Dessa Rose*, 232). As Deborah McDowell aptly characterizes, “Nehemiah’s ‘book’ is incomplete; it has literally fallen apart and is nothing more than loose pages ‘scatter[ed] about the floor,’ unreadable scribbling that even the sheriff (another agent of the father’s law) cannot read.”<sup>77</sup> In this scene, explains Elizabeth Beaulieu, Dessa achieves a “dramatic reversal, one in which she exercises precisely the same type of power over [Nehemiah] that he used in their conversations in the root cellar.”<sup>78</sup> Beaulieu writes, “In his rage at being exposed and undermined, Nehemiah lashes out broadly: ‘You-all in this together’—grabbing at us—‘womanhood’ [232]. Although Dessa’s greatest fear was ‘be[ing] brought so low by such a trifling little white man’ [225], in fact, it is Nehemiah who is ‘brought low’ as a result of the collaboration of women.”<sup>79</sup> As they leave the jail, Dessa and Ruth clarify their correct names to each other, an expression of mutual goodwill that Beaulieu reads as the solidification of their friendship.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> McDowell, “Witnessing Slavery after Freedom –Dessa Rose,” 150.

<sup>78</sup> Beaulieu, *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative*, 49.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

To the extent that the power reversals rely in part on the ruse that Dessa is the slave of Miz Carlisle, the themes of performativity and interracial friendship recall the denouement of the miniseries *Roots*, in which George and Martha Johnson collaborate with the Harvey family to overthrow the authority of Klan leader Evan Brent. In the film's conclusion, the Johnsons move with the Harveys to Tennessee. Dessa reveals in the epilogue that she and the other runaways did indeed migrate west as planned, but Ruth did not accompany them, nor did she return to her family in Charleston. According to Dessa, Ruth went to "Philly-me-York—some city didn't allow slaves" (*Dessa Rose*, 236). Dessa reflects that Ruth's presence might have caused them no more trouble than they encountered without her, which was considerably more than they anticipated. After several refusals, Harker finally found a wagon master who would agree to let them join his wagon train but only if Ruth signed a document stating that she was their mistress and was emancipating them to make the journey. Dessa admits that she misses Ruth and wonders whether Ruth ever mentions her to Clara. While she says she has met some good white men, none are "the equal of Ruth" (*Dessa Rose*, 236).

Finally, Dessa reveals that her story has been told to her son Mony and passed down to her grandchildren. Dessa emphasizes the importance of that family oral history and reframes the entire third section as the dictation of that oral history. Dessa expresses her hope that her loved ones, which apparently includes Ruth, remember her as she remembers them: "I hopes I live for my people like they do for me, so sharp sometime I can't believe it's all in my mind." But because her "mind wanders" Dessa has the story written down. The last section of the novel becomes Dessa's precaution against forgetting. In her narration, Dessa declares her certainty that she will never forget some momentous events, like the fear she felt when Oscar tried to assault Ruth. She never forgets that Ruth is a white woman, though for a time she finds it "easy to forget" Ruth's relationship with Nathan. One of her most poignant comments on memory is a parenthetical aside, when she reveals that she never knew that cold weather came from the north or recognized any significance of birds flying south for the winter

until Harker brought it to her attention. “This is what I hold against slavery,” says Dessa. “May come a time when I *forgive*—cause I don’t think I’m set up to *forget*—the beatings, the selling, the killings, but I don’t think I [will] ever forgive the ignorance they kept us in” (*Dessa Rose*, 208). Having a written record told in her own words also becomes Dessa’s insurance against the kind of literary enslavement Nehemiah tried to perpetrate. Though the third section is an as-told-to narrative, the amanuensis is one of Dessa’s descendants, whom she instructs to read the text back to her, allowing Dessa to retain authorial control. Explaining that, “I never will forget Nemi trying to read me,” Dessa recognizes in that experience both the power of writing and an example of the literary betrayal to which Williams refers in her introduction. Nemi’s attempt to “read” Dessa encompasses both the initial interviews for his failed book and his attempt to decipher her identity from the scars the slaveholder inscribes in her flesh. Exercising authorial control over her own story is Dessa’s literary act of self-liberation. It concludes with a final comment on the economies of slavery and freedom. Of the younger generations who have heard the preceding story from their elders, Dessa says, “I hope they never have to pay what it cost us to own ourselves[....]Oh, we have paid for our children’s place in the world again, and again...” (*Dessa Rose*, 236).

## Chapter 9

### **“Remembering Seemed Unwise”: Motherhood, Infanticide, and Memory as Human Parasitism in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved***

Toni Morrison based the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved* on the true incident of fugitive slave Margaret Garner, who killed her eldest daughter to prevent her re-enslavement. In published accounts of the case, Morrison observed, the ministers and journalists who interviewed Garner “kept remarking on the fact that she was not frothing at the mouth, she was not a madwoman, and she kept saying [of her children], ‘No, they’re not going to live like that. They will not live the way I have lived.’”<sup>1</sup> Garner, who was also pregnant at the time, escaped slavery in Kentucky with her husband, four children, and her husband’s parents. They fled to Cincinnati and sought refuge with Margaret’s free cousin. Archibald Gaines, the man who claimed to own Margaret and her children pursued the family to Ohio. As author Steven Weisenburger relates in his narrative history of the case, when Gaines arrived with deputy U.S. marshals to take the Garners into custody, Margaret “seized a butcher knife and nearly decapitated her two-year-old daughter, Mary,” and was “turning on her other three children when slave catchers burst in and subdued her.”<sup>2</sup> The case raised questions of legal jurisdiction and the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. Reasoning that a few years of incarceration would be preferable to having the family returned to slavery in Kentucky, abolitionists favored having the Garners tried for the murder in Ohio and planned to raise money to buy their freedom once the sentence was served. Margaret Garner was never tried for murder, but an abolitionist lawyer contested the family’s return to slavery based on previous trips Margaret and her husband had made to Cincinnati with their owners. Since the slaveholders had willingly brought their slaves into free territory, the lawyer argued, the

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<sup>1</sup> Mervyn Rothstein, “Toni Morrison, In her New Novel, Defends Women,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 5.

family was already legally free during the time of their escape.<sup>3</sup> After a day's court proceedings, abolitionist Lucy Stone made a statement before the packed courtroom in which she argued that Margaret Garner's experience of slavery could be discerned from the light skin color of her three youngest children, including the daughter she killed; Stone implied that Margaret Garner had been forced into a sexual relationship with her master and that he, not Margaret's husband, had fathered the younger children.<sup>4</sup> Margaret Garner and her family were ultimately returned to the custody of that same slaveowner, who had Margaret shuttled back and forth to a relative's plantation in Arkansas and around Kentucky in order to elude the Ohio legal authorities who meant to extradite her.<sup>5</sup> On the first trip to Arkansas, the steamboat that carried them south was involved in a crash with another steamboat. In the chaotic aftermath, Margaret Garner and her ten-month-old daughter went overboard. The child's body was never recovered, and according to witnesses, after she was pulled from the water, Garner made statements that implied the baby's death was intentional.<sup>6</sup> Morrison's project, however, was not simply to recount Garner's story, and she intentionally did not research Garner's life beyond a few basic facts—the number of children, their sexes, and that after she cut one child's throat “she was about to bash another one's head up against the wall when someone stopped her.” Though Morrison did extensive research about the period, she told a *New York Times* reporter, “I refused to find out anything else about Margaret Garner. I really wanted to invent her life.”<sup>7</sup>

*Beloved* is set in 1870s Ohio, eighteen years after the murder of Sethe's oldest daughter. From the time she arrived at her mother-in-law's house with her newborn baby to the day the plantation

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 112, 114, 117, 238.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 171-173.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 206-256.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 224-225.

<sup>7</sup> Rothstein, “Toni Morrison, In her New Novel, Defends Women.”



manager known as “schoolteacher” arrived to carry her and her children back to slavery, Sethe had twenty-eight days of freedom. The sight of schoolteacher and his nephews, who sexually assaulted her, drove Sethe to the violence that constitutes the central trauma of the novel. Since then, the ghost of the murdered baby has haunted the house at 124 Bluestone Road. Her presence sometimes manifests as violence against the occupants and finally drives Sethe’s sons to run away. The household dynamic is disturbed by the arrival of Paul D, a man from Sethe’s past who shares her memories of slavery and who, thinking the ghost a nefarious presence, drives it out of the house. The exorcism is soon followed by the arrival of a mysterious young woman who’s only name, Beloved, is the same as the epitaph Sethe had inscribed on her baby’s tombstone. Sethe and her daughter Denver both come to believe that Beloved is the baby who died at her mother’s hand. Toward the end of the novel, however, after Beloved has reverted from her human form to a supernatural entity, Paul D asks whether Denver thinks Beloved truly was her sister. “At times,” Denver replies. “At times I think she was—more.”<sup>8</sup> While the title character is, in one sense, Sethe’s daughter, Denver’s theory that she is also something “more” suggests Beloved as both the embodiment of Sethe’s individual trauma and the collective memory of slaves’ experience.

Morrison intended the character of Beloved to function on two levels. “She is a spirit on one hand, literally she is what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead,” the author explained. “She is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from a true, factual slave ship.”<sup>9</sup> Speaking of the casualties of the slave trade, who perished during the Middle Passage, Morrison lamented, “Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived in the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people. The people

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<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 242. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Beloved*.

<sup>9</sup> “In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” interview by Marsha Darling, *The Women’s Review of Books* 5, no. 6 (1988): 5.

who arrived—there is lore about them. But nothing survives about ... that.”<sup>10</sup>

*Beloved* is a story about remembering the trauma of slavery. In his review for *Newsweek* Walter Clemons presciently wrote, “Though technically ‘freed,’ the book’s black characters have stumbled into post-Civil War existence unable to free themselves from memories of a system in which they had no rightful ownership of Self.” “Memory,” he observed “is so oppressive for the novel’s characters that stifling it is a means of survival.” Lauding the “splintered, piecemeal revelation of the past” as “one of the technical wonders of Morrison’s narrative,” Clemons asserted, “We gradually understand that this isn’t tricky storytelling but the intricate exploration of trauma.”<sup>11</sup> The structure of the novel, in which characters recall and relate their enslaved past in narrative fragments, simulates the cognitive process of individual memory. In *Remembering Trauma*, clinical psychologist Richard J. McNally explains, “Autobiographical recollection is a reconstructive, not a reproductive, process. Recalling one’s past is not like replaying a videotape of one’s life in working memory. When we remember an event from our past, we reconstruct it from encoded elements distributed throughout the brain.”<sup>12</sup> In the opening pages of the novel, Morrison reveals that Sethe “worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe” because to her “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (*Beloved*, 5). Later, in the kitchen of the restaurant where she works, as Sethe kneads dough, she reflects that there is “Nothing better than that to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (*Beloved*, 68). Yet despite her efforts, she finds that “her brain [is] devious” and against her preference conjures a past that she would rather forget. Intrusive memories of the ironically named Sweet Home rush at her with deceptive beauty that “never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too” (*Beloved*, 6).

Though it became a national bestseller, Morrison once supposed that *Beloved* would be her least

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Clemons, “A Gravestone of Memories,” *Newsweek*, September 28, 1987, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. McNally, *Remembering Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 35.

read novel “because it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember.” She also described Americans’ collective memory of slavery as “national amnesia.”<sup>13</sup> Yet as Morrison also explained in a separate interview, when the characters who resist remembering and narrating their enslaved experience finally do confront that past, the effect is salutary, both for the character and the larger community. “...[N]one speaks, no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced,” said Morrison, “They don’t want to talk, they don’t want to remember, they don’t want to say it, because they’re afraid of it—which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they’re two, and three, and four, you know? The collective sharing of that information heals the individual—and the collective.”<sup>14</sup> It is important to note, however, that Morrison prefaced her comments with a caveat that seems to differentiate between certain therapeutic acts of memory and what eventually develops between Sethe and Beloved. “There is a necessity for remembering the horror,” said Morrison, “but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive.”<sup>15</sup>

Just after the occurrence of one of her intrusive memories, Sethe finds the only other survivor of slavery at Sweet Home on her front porch. Paul D’s arrival literalizes the return of the past Sethe has tried to keep at bay, especially as they begin to tell each other their traumatic experiences. The process of Sethe and Paul D recounting the past to one another yields a narrative that each knows only in part and has intentionally tried to suppress. By novel’s end, the conversations between Sethe and Paul D as well as their individual, unspoken recollections offer a complex reconstruction of their last days at Sweet Home, including the failed runaway attempt and Sethe’s decision to send her children ahead

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<sup>13</sup> “Toni Morrison: The Pain of Being Black,” interview with Toni Morrison, by Bonnie Angelo, *Time*, May 22, 1989, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (57898872).

<sup>14</sup> Darling and Morrison, “In the Realm of Responsibility, 5.”

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

without her when she could not locate the other adults. Sethe tells of her assault by schoolteacher's nephews. One nephew held her down while the other "nursed" her, and schoolteacher watched and recorded it all with ink that Sethe had made. When she reported them to the mistress, Mrs. Garner, they retaliated with a whipping. As Sethe relates the story, Paul D is shocked and outraged that their enslavers whipped her, but for Sethe, their worst offense is that their assault sexualized and expropriated the breast milk which was meant to nourish her children. "They used cowhide on you?" Paul D asks in disbelief. "And they took my milk," Sethe emphasizes. "They beat you and you was pregnant?" he says. "And they took my milk!" Sethe exclaims, as if Paul D has missed the most important point (*Beloved*, 16).

Much of the trauma of slavery for Sethe is framed by the act of nursing, which to her represents mother-child relationships, particularly relationships between mothers and daughters. Sethe's alienation from her own mother is detailed in part by young Sethe being consigned to the care of a wet nurse. In addition to the breast milk stolen by the nephews, Sethe also recalls her determination to reach Ohio after the assault. She is motivated by the conviction that only she can provide sustenance for the baby she sent ahead to freedom. She recalls with pride that after she had given birth and arrived at freedom with her newborn Denver, she "had milk enough for all" (*Beloved*, 93). Twenty-eight days later, after Stamp Paid saves Denver from having her head bashed against a wall, Sethe nurses her surviving daughter while still covered in the blood of the baby whose throat she cut. To all of this, Paul D adds a distressing image of Halle, whose fate was unknown to Sethe. Before leaving Sweet Home, Sethe searched for her husband, who was nowhere to be found; so with a lacerated back, she set out alone for Ohio and the children she sent ahead to freedom. Paul D, it turns out, saw Halle once afterward. "Last time I saw him," says Paul D, "he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face" (*Beloved*, 65). Until he surmises that Halle must have witnessed Sethe's assault, Paul D had only known that "whatever he [Halle] saw go on in the barn that day broke him like a twig" (*Beloved*, 64).

Despite preference to reject such knowledge, which only adds to her anguish, Sethe becomes “resigned to her rebellious brain” and its seemingly endless capacity to consume every awful detail offered up to it. Employing the same description Baby Suggs applies to the baby ghost, Morrison writes of Sethe’s cognitive memory, “Like a greedy child it snatched up everything” (*Beloved*, 65). Eventually, *Beloved* enacts the role of the “greedy child,” both in her desire for stories and in her consumption of household resources, until she threatens the lives of the other occupants.

Though their individual traumatic experiences at Sweet Home were quite different, the place itself and the people they both knew constitute a shared experience for Sethe and Paul D, one that does not include Denver. Sethe and Paul D quickly become “a twosome, saying ‘your daddy’ and ‘Sweet Home’ in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her” (*Beloved*, 12). Though Denver likes stories, especially the story of how her mother gave birth to her en route to freedom, Denver does not like stories of her mother’s life in slavery. “How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can’t stop talking about it?” she asks (*Beloved*, 13). Denver resents Paul D’s presence because of the past he shares with her mother but also because he shouts away the ghost, the only company Denver has had since her grandmother’s death and the loss of her two brothers, who were driven out of the house by that same ghost. Denver has grown up cut off from the community, except for a brief school attendance that ended when a classmate asked a question about her mother—apparently the first Denver had heard of how her sister died. Her life afterward consists of isolation, loneliness, and as she later reveals, fear of Sethe.

Unlike the brothers who were frightened away and Sethe, who tolerates the presence, Denver takes solace in the company of the ghost. When the mysterious woman *Beloved* appears with no discernable past and no last name, Denver is the first to conclude that *Beloved* is her sister, her ghostly childhood companion returned in the flesh. Denver is attentive to *Beloved* to the point of growing possessive and resentful of what she deems interference by her mother. Even after Denver suspects

Beloved of trying to kill Sethe in the clearing, Denver acknowledges to herself that if she were forced to choose between Sethe and Beloved, the choice would be clear. She would choose Beloved. Denver's regard for Beloved is not reciprocated. When Denver asks Beloved to keep her identity a secret between them, not to tell Sethe, the appeal provokes anger from Beloved, who warns Denver never to tell her what to do. Indicating that she considers Denver expendable, Beloved tells her, "She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have" (*Beloved*, 71).

### **Motherhood and Infanticide**

*Beloved* is particularly concerned with slave motherhood, which Morrison examines through Sethe's murder of her infant daughter and attempted murder of all of her children. In the first half of the novel, Sethe recalls that when her husband failed to make the rendezvous for their escape, she sent the three eldest children ahead to freedom while she searched unsuccessfully for Halle. Pregnant, her flesh gashed by whipping, Sethe nearly dies making the journey alone. As she lies secluded in some brush, physically exhausted, the prospect of her own death is of little concern to Sethe, but for the sake of her unborn baby, she summons the strength to moan and to make her presence known to a passerby. Amy Denver, the young woman who renders aid, had served what she describes as a hereditary indenture. "My mama worked for these here people to pay for her passage," she explains to Sethe. "But then she had me and since she died right after, well, they said I had to work for em to pay it off" (*Beloved*, 31). Having worked off her mother's obligation, Amy encounters Sethe on her way to Boston, where she intends to buy velvet. Amy's indenture belongs to a recurring trope of indebtedness. This motif includes the balance of what Halle owes Mr. Garner for the purchase of Baby Suggs's freedom and Stamp Paid's certainty that his debt was settled long ago by the restraint he showed in not killing the master who forced his wife into a sexual relationship. The circumstances of her birth make Amy's

namesake Denver “feel like a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it. But who she owed or what to pay it with eluded her” (*Beloved*, 73).

The morning of Denver’s birth, when the baby’s inactivity convinces her the child has died in utero, Sethe is driven by the necessity of reaching her still-nursing daughter in Ohio to ensure the older baby does not starve. Sethe is wrong about the pre-natal death, but in both instances, Sethe’s only care is for her children, particularly the two youngest who are most dependent on her for their survival. That maternal responsibility is the reason Sethe endures physical agony. It is the source of her determination. It motivates her to stay alive and to reach her family in Ohio. Once, after Sethe and Denver try unsuccessfully to end the haunting by summoning the ghost, Denver remarks that “for a baby, she throws a powerful spell.” Sethe replies, “No more powerful than the way I loved her” (*Beloved*, 4). Less than a month after reaching her children, however, that powerful maternal love turns to unthinkable violence. As a mother, Sethe’s sole purpose is the preservation of her children; yet faced with the likelihood of re-enslavement, she leaves the two boys for dead, tries to dash one baby’s head against a wall, and takes a hacksaw to the other’s throat.

In *Beloved*, the fatal violence Sethe inflicts on the little girl she adores is not the only instance of a mother killing her child. When Beloved inquires about Sethe’s mother, the question, which conjures painful memories for Sethe, reveals a family history of infanticide. Sethe says she never saw her mother more than a few times, laboring in rice fields or working indigo. She rarely slept in the same cabin as young Sethe and was usually in line for her work detail before her daughter woke in the morning. Sethe speculates that her mother may have nursed her for two or three weeks before she returned to the field and baby Sethe was left in the care of Nan, the bondswoman tasked with childcare and breastfeeding slave infants. Sethe’s most vividly recounted memory of her mother is of being shown a brand under the mother’s breast and being told that if anything happened that left Sethe unable to recognize her mother’s face, she could identify her mother by that mark. Not understanding that it

signified her mother's chattel status, little Sethe asked her mother to make the mark on her. For that request, Sethe's mother slapped her. "I didn't understand it then," says Sethe, "Not until I had a mark of my own" (*Beloved*, 58). Sethe's only recollection of interacting with her mother is a discussion that defines the mother's identity by the physical scar that also marks her as property. The conversation culminates in the mother's act of violence against her child. The mother, who was later hanged along with several other slaves, seems to have anticipated her fate and tried to prepare Sethe for that eventuality. Though Sethe never learns the reason for her mother's execution, the severity of the punishment and the number of people hanged—"It was a lot of them," Sethe says—suggests her mother may have participated in organized resistance. By the time the body was cut down, Sethe could not even tell whether it bore the mark her mother had shown her. After the hangings, in the language her mother spoke and that Sethe once understood but no longer recalls, Nan told Sethe that she had been on the slave ship with her mother. Both women had been sexually assaulted by the ship's crew and by other whites. According to Nan, multiple births had resulted from the abuse, and in each case, Sethe's mother resorted to infanticide. "She threw them all away but you," Nan tells Sethe. "The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites, she also threw away. Without names, she threw them" (*Beloved*, 59). Sethe, the one child her mother allowed to live, was conceived in a consensual union with a black man, for whom Sethe is named.

Toward the end of the novel, Morrison relates a similar story of Ella, the woman who leads the community of women who gather at 124 and pray to exorcise the evil torturing Sethe. Before she comes to believe the mysterious young woman is her daughter returned from the dead, Sethe suspects *Beloved* might have survived an ordeal like the one Ella suffered in her youth. Ella was enslaved and sexually abused by a father and son she called "the lowest yet" and "against whom she measured all atrocities." During her captivity, Ella gave birth to "a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet.'" She refused to nurse her rapists' offspring, and after five days, the baby died. The one common element



in all the novel's stories of infant death is that the mothers suffer sexual abuse by their enslavers. The accounts of Ella and Sethe's mother relate the experience of bondwomen who give birth to their abusers' children. In Ella's case, the baby dies of neglect; Nan's account implies Sethe had multiple half-siblings, who died by their mother's hand. All of the cases suggest slavery as a violation of mother-child relationships, especially as a consequence of sexual abuse.<sup>16</sup> As Sethe ultimately defends her actions, however, she makes clear that her baby's death is not like the other accounts; Sethe kills her child not as an act of maternal rejection but, she says, as an act of protection.

### **Baby Suggs**

While the absence of a relationship between Sethe and her mother demonstrates slavery's natal alienation from a child's perspective, Baby Suggs's biography is a story of a mother's repeated loss. The people in Baby Suggs life had been "moved around like checkers" at the will or whim of their enslavers. "What Baby called the nastiness of life," writes Morrison, "was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children" (*Beloved*, 22). Baby Suggs had given birth to eight children. Her two eldest, both little girls who still had their baby teeth, were sold away without Baby Suggs's knowledge. She heard about the sales after the fact and never had an opportunity to say goodbye. Baby Suggs had had a four-month-long sexual relationship with a straw boss in exchange for the assurance that she could keep her third child. The man broke his word and traded the little boy for a load of lumber. Following the betrayal, Baby discovered she was pregnant again, but "that child she would not love, and the rest she could not" (*Beloved*, 22). When her youngest child Halle was born, she "barely glanced" at him "because it wasn't

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<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Caroline Rody argues, "Morrison replaces the prototypical white master's crime against black slave women — rape — with a virtual rape of Sethe's motherhood"; Caroline Rody, 'Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamor for a Kiss,'" *American Literary History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/489799>.

worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway” (*Beloved*, 131). Seven times her children had been taken from her. She had no reason to believe that Halle’s fate would be any different, but to her surprise, Halle was not sold, and when he grew to adulthood, the child Baby Suggs had not bothered to examine at birth bought her freedom (*Beloved*, 132). Baby Suggs’s guarded approach to motherhood following the devastating losses of her first three children illustrates what also serves as Paul D’s philosophy on human relationships, drawn from years of enslavement. Observing Sethe and Denver, Paul D disapproves of what he deems Sethe’s “risky” behavior. “For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous,” thinks Paul D, “especially if it was her children she had settled on to love.” Paul D advocates emotional restraint as a means of self-preservation: “The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one” (*Beloved*, 42). Likewise, Ella considers love a “serious disability” (*Beloved*, 243).

Baby Suggs could not see what she, a woman in her sixties with a body worn out by slavery, needed with freedom, but as a free woman, she discovers what her son had intuitively known about freedom, “that there was nothing like it in the world” (*Beloved*, 133). Baby Suggs is perplexed that Garner consistently addresses her as Jenny, a name she has never known to be hers. After all her years as Garner’s slave, she finally asks him why he calls her that and learns that was the name on the bill of sale he received, when he purchased her from her former owner, Whitlow. Suggs, she explains was the name of her husband, who had always addressed her as “Baby.” The husband had fled years earlier, according to a spousal pact that whoever had an opportunity to make a run for freedom would take it, “together if possible, alone if not, and no looking back” (*Beloved*, 135). Baby Suggs never hears from her spouse but believes he obtained his freedom, and despite Garner’s suggestion that Jenny Whitlow is a more appropriate name for a free woman, she refuses to change her name in the hope that her

husband might find her.

As a free woman, Baby Suggs's first order of business is to try to locate her lost children. Two of her daughters died on a ship waiting to sail from Virginia to Savannah. Two of her sons ran away thirty years earlier, so any attempt to find them might endanger them. For two years, the local preacher writes letters for her, but all Baby Suggs is able to learn is that the Whitlow farm no longer exists. Her only other lead, that "a man name Dunn got Ardelia and went west" is too vague to trace. Despite her disappointed efforts, Baby Suggs focuses on the fact that Halle is married and is expecting a baby. In the years before Sethe arrives in Ohio, Baby Suggs becomes an unchurched preacher, but after the death of her granddaughter, she resigns herself to the notion that "there was no grace – imaginary or real" (*Beloved*, 83). Heartbroken, depressed, Baby Suggs spends her last days confined to her bed, where she remains "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead," where she cannot "get interested in leaving life or living it" (*Beloved*, 3).

### **"A Greedy Child"**

After her arrival 124, *Beloved* demonstrates an insatiable appetite for sweets and stories. From the time Denver offers *Beloved* a piece of sweet bread, "sugar could always be counted on to please her" (*Beloved*, 52). Whereas, Denver "hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself," *Beloved* urges Sethe to talk about her past with prompts like, "Tell me your diamonds," a reference to the crystal earbobs Sethe received as a wedding present from Mrs. Garner. As Morrison writes,

It became a way to feed her. Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on *Beloved*, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction *Beloved* got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased *Beloved*) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there—like a tender place in the corner of her mouth

that the bit left. But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure (*Beloved*, 55).

Sethe's surprising reaction to recounting the tales to Beloved seemingly suggests narration as a means of working through traumatic memory. The "hurt" Sethe experiences with each mention of her past recalls the words of Amy Denver in a story that Beloved also presses to have told. In multiple accounts, as Amy massages Sethe's legs, she tells her, "it's gonna hurt now... Anything dead coming back to life hurts... More it hurt more better it is. Can't nothing heal without pain, you know" (*Beloved*, 33, 73). According to Amy's philosophy, Beloved's demand for stories and its effect on Sethe, early on, seems to indicate a healing process. But Beloved's appetites eventually take a sinister turn, a development foreshadowed by the "profound satisfaction" Beloved derives from the same narrative act that causes Sethe pain. Amy's remarks, which apply to the restored sensation in Sethe's legs and feet, fail to account for any other kind of pain, which is just as likely to be a symptom of an untreated or worsening condition. The assertion attributed to Amy, that the more something hurts the better, portends Sethe's eventual resignation to Beloved's emotional torture.

Beloved's uncanny knowledge of things she could not possibly know provides clues that she is the baby ghost returned. Her affinity for sweets signifies on the name Sweet Home and is also consistent with babies' innate preference for sweet tastes.<sup>17</sup> As she describes Beloved's greediness for stories, Morrison attributes to Beloved the same quality Sethe associates with her brain's capacity for horrific detail and that Baby Suggs attributes to the ghost. Just as she queries Sethe to talk about her past, Beloved prompts Denver to relate the story of her birth. As she talks, the tale acquires a new vividness for Denver who begins "feeling how it must felt to her mother [and] seeing how it must have looked" (*Beloved*, 73). Through Denver's narration, she and Beloved attempt to recreate Sethe's

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<sup>17</sup> Eric Schlosser, "Why McDonald's Fries Taste So Good," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 2001, 52, EBSCO Academic Search Complete (3918600).

experience. “The monologue became, in fact, a duet” writes Morrison, who again suggests the narrative of Sethe’s past as a kind of food for Beloved. She describes Denver’s narration as “nursing Beloved’s interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved” (*Beloved*, 73).

When Stamp Paid tells Paul D of the infanticide, he initially refuses to believe the story; when Paul D questions Sethe, their conversation returns to the topic of love. Sethe tells Paul D, “Look like I loved em[the children] more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to” (*Beloved*, 154). Her explanation for the violence is that she prevented schoolteacher from re-enslaving her children. “I stopped him...I took and put my babies where they’d be safe,” she tells Paul D (*Beloved*, 155). Recognizing the contradiction in Sethe’s assertion, Paul D reflects that “what she wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety” (*Beloved*, 155). In the argument that follows, Paul D tells her, “You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” meaning he considers the killing of her child a bestial act (*Beloved*, 156). Any crueller words are difficult to imagine. At this point, Paul D has already recalled the degradation of wearing a bit in his mouth, of being watched by a rooster called Mister and believing that barnyard animal had more self-possession than Paul D would ever have. As a fellow survivor of slavery, Paul D knows the psychological effects of bondage and the attempt to deprive enslaved people of their humanity; yet he pronounces Sethe less than human for attempting to spare her children the degradation they both endured. Later, Sethe recalls how schoolteacher instructed his nephews to list her human characteristics on one side of their paper, her animal characteristics on the other (*Beloved*, 183). When the signal came that the time for escape was at hand, the children were the only ones ready, so Sethe sent them on to her mother-in-law’s house, vowing, “No notebook for my babies” (*Beloved*, 188). For Sethe, white male literacy is repeatedly associated with the power to dehumanize. When she is assaulted by the nephews, schoolteacher observes and writes it all in his notebook (*Beloved*, 34, 91).

Much as Denver and Beloved's recreation of Sethe's journey becomes a "duet," Morrison creates a sequence of four chapters in which Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, each takes a turn as narrator to recount her traumatic experience in the first person; though the thoughts remain unspoken, the sequence culminates in a joint narration that Morrison elsewhere describes as a "threnody."<sup>18</sup> Sethe states and restates her belief that she need not justify her actions to Beloved; she assures herself that Beloved already understands that Sethe killed her child in order to protect her. She says of Beloved, "She had to be safe and I put her where she would be....I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (*Beloved*, 190). While her statement evokes the social death of bondspeople legally reduced to chattel, the death Sethe fears for her daughter, more than the physical one she inflicts, is the psychological experience Sethe herself has endured. Sethe reveals that her plan was to kill the entire family, "to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is," but, she explains, "They stopped me from getting us there," (*Beloved*, 193). The reference to her mother precisely as Sethe confesses her own maternal intentions suggests that Sethe's actions were also informed by her childhood experience, which Sethe recalls only when Beloved's questions evoke her suppressed memories. In her silent monologue, Sethe praises Beloved for coming back to her "like a good girl, like a daughter," which is what Sethe says she "wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one." Sethe's plan of keeping her family together by murder-suicide is thwarted by an undefined "they," which presumably includes the intervention by Stamp Paid, but the "they," who separate Sethe from her mother and prevent her from being a daughter are the enslavers. As Sethe's narrative relates Beloved's death to that of Sethe's mother, Morrison underscores slavery's destruction and distortion of familial relations, as exemplified by Sethe's own experience. The absence of a parent-child relationship between Sethe and her mother

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<sup>18</sup> Darling and Morrison, "In the Realm of Responsibility," 6.

exemplifies natal alienation; as a mother, Sethe's need to protect her child from slavery drives Sethe to kill her baby and to attempt to kill all of her children, as she considers death preferable to re-enslavement. Sethe tells Beloved that she wanted to lie in the grave along with her baby girl and says she "would have if Buglar and Howard and Denver didn't need me" (*Beloved*, 194). Just as Sethe's maternal obligations compel her survival in the woods on her journey to Ohio, the needs of her living children keep Sethe from dying along with her daughter. Within this monologue, Sethe also wonders what offense her mother and fellow slaves committed to result in hanging. She considers the possibility of an attempted escape but rejects that idea because it means her mother planned to leave her, and to Sethe, the idea of a mother abandoning her child is unthinkable.

Just as Sethe's narration begins with a declaration of her filial relation to her visitor—"Beloved, she my daughter"—Denver states her own relation: "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk." Denver calls Beloved her "secret company," who served as Denver's playmate and companion until Paul D arrived and drove her out of the house. Denver's narration testifies to a fear of her mother, which her brothers shared. "I love my mother," says Denver, "but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it" (*Beloved*, 195). Denver confesses her fear that what drove Sethe to kill her sister will happen again. Denver thus identifies two potential dangers—a recurrence of Sethe's commission of violence and a return of the threat that drove Sethe to kill Denver's sister. Denver doesn't know what that threat was, and though she acknowledges that she needs to know, she does not want to find out. This explains why Denver likes to hear the story of her birth but nothing about her mother's experience of slavery. Denver also relates the logic of her self-imposed incarceration to 124: "Whatever it is," Denver says, referring to the danger that drove her mother to kill her sister, "it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right in the yard if it wants to." Her defense is to confine herself to the house, which she views as a place of safety, and to keep vigilant watch over the yard so that "it can't happen

again and my mother won't have to kill me too" (*Beloved*, 195). Denver also sees herself as Beloved's protector. "This time I have to keep my mother away from her," says Denver, whose plan to advise Beloved not to love Sethe too much reiterates others warnings to moderate one's affections as a form of self-preservation. Denver's narrative fixates on her fear of Sethe and that "maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children" (*Beloved*, 196). At one point, she characterizes her relationship with her mother as a kind of performance she carries on to protect herself. According to Denver, "I spent all of my outside self loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me" (*Beloved*, 196). Probably to cope with her chronic fear of Sethe, Denver invents a fantasy of her father's return. Denver's explanation for Beloved's appearance is that "my sister [has] come to help me wait for my daddy" (*Beloved*, 198). When she elaborates on her vision for a reunified family, Denver imagines it will consist of herself, Beloved, and their father. Indifferent to her mother's role in this scenario, Denver says she can stay or leave with Paul D (*Beloved*, 198). If she were to stay, Denver doubts her father would want a marriage with Sethe. While she imagines no significant place for Sethe in their reconstituted family and professes nearly a lifetime of fear that Sethe might kill her, Denver suggests no such fear either of Beloved or the baby ghost who was her childhood companion. Denver relies on the word of Baby Suggs, who assured her that the ghost would never hurt her because she had tasted its blood. Sethe was the true target of the haunting, her grandmother said, as well as Baby Suggs herself, for doing nothing to prevent the baby's death (*Beloved*, 199). Baby Suggs told Denver she only needed to be careful because "it was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love" (*Beloved*, 199). Denver concludes with an assertion that she does love Beloved, yet declares in the language of possession, "She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (*Beloved*, 199).

Beloved's narration begins, "I am Beloved and she is mine" (*Beloved*, 200). Though her statement echoes Denver's, Beloved's thoughts are concerned with Sethe. Lacking punctuation, Beloved's fragmented narration recalls sensory perceptions of being kidnapped and held on a slave



ship, an experience she describes as a perpetual present: “All of it is now it is always now” (*Beloved*, 200). The next chapter begins with Beloved’s narration and becomes a collective narration between Sethe, Denver, and Beloved.

After her conversation with Paul D, Sethe tries to take Baby Suggs’s advice to “lay it all down”; she abandons her housework to go ice skating with Beloved and Denver (*Beloved*, 165). When Beloved hums a song that Sethe composed for her children—this, after she had also known about the crystal earrings from Mrs. Garner—Sethe concludes that Beloved is her child returned. Sethe initially interprets Beloved’s presence as a sign of absolution that frees her from her painful recollections of the woodshed and its aftermath. “She ain’t even mad with me. Not a bit,” Sethe assumes (*Beloved*, 173). In her naïve assessment, Sethe she tells herself, “I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (*Beloved*, 174). Sethe believes she is now free to forget her mother-in-law’s grief, which she describes as “how baby Suggs’ heart collapsed,” as well as her incarceration and the terror of her sons, who survived their wounds but would not let go of each other or allow their mother near them. Sethe decides that she need not engage with the outside world. According to Sethe, “The world is this room...There is no world outside my door.” Her only concern is “How bad is the scar?” (*Beloved*, 174).

Once Sethe sees Beloved’s scar, the pair begin to exclude Denver. Sethe spends all of her time playing with Beloved and arrives later and later to work, until she is eventually fired. The women indulge in extravagances, until they use up Sethe’s life savings and food runs short. The relationship takes a sinister turn as Beloved grows increasingly demanding and relegates Sethe to a position of subordination. “Beloved took the best of everything—first,” writes Morrison. “The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through for her children.” Sethe thus attempts to do what she first thought was not required of her. Though Sethe recounts the hardships she

endured for the sake of her children, her explanations do not elicit understanding, only accusations.

Beloved insists that Sethe was cruel and abandoned her—the very act Sethe considers unimaginable for any mother. Of Beloved’s death, Sethe explains that “her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side forever.” Beloved counters with her own stories of the loneliness and torment she suffered on the Middle Passage (*Beloved*, 229). Denver observes a role reversal in which Beloved looks to be the mother, and Sethe a chastised child. As their food supply dwindles, Sethe begins to deprive herself. Beloved grows large and thrives while Sethe wastes away. The relationship begins to resemble that of a parasite to its host. According to Morrison, Sethe “sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (*Beloved*, 237). Beloved, the “greedy child” incarnate who feeds on Sethe’s traumatic memories of slavery, enacts a dynamic of human parasitism, the term sociologist Orlando Patterson employs to characterize the relationship between master and slave.<sup>19</sup> As Sethe recalls the most horrific aspects of her enslavement, Beloved’s appetites become life threatening to Sethe in a clear instance of what Morrison termed a “destructive” way of remembering. Beloved dismisses Sethe’s explanations and counters with her own competing recollections and accusations. Remembering and narrating become a kind of torture for Sethe.

Excluded by Sethe and Beloved, Denver becomes an observer. In Denver’s estimation, “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her” (*Beloved*, 238). The language of Denver’s assessment—that Beloved is “making [Sethe] pay”—situates their story within the trope of indebtedness. Morrison goes on to explain, “It was as though Sethe didn’t really want

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<sup>19</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 334-342. Caroline Rody characterizes this relationship as a form of vampirism; Barbara Schapiro writes that, “A preponderance of oral imagery characterizes Morrison’s novel,” a circumstance she relates to the fact that “the first physical mode of relationship to the mother is oral,” as are “the earliest emotional needs in relation to the mother.” Rody, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: History, ‘Rememory,’ and a ‘Clamor for a Kiss,’” 112; Barbara Schapiro, “The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison’s ‘*Beloved*,’” *Contemporary Literature* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 197-198.

forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out” (*Beloved*, 239). As she witnesses these developments, Denver shifts her concern from Beloved’s safety to that of her mother. Necessity drives Denver into the outside world, first to ask assistance to keep the three women from starving, then to find a job. Pursuing a life outside 124, Denver ends her isolation from the same protective and self-preservationist impulses that for so many years compel her to stay in the house and keep watch for the danger that entered the yard.

When Denver’s reports make clear to the women of the community that the danger is now in the house, they gather to pray away the evil tormenting Sethe. Ashraf Rushdy notes the significance of Ella leading the exorcism. Though she considers Sethe’s “crime...staggering” and disapproves of Sethe’s pride, Ella’s own history of abuse and the death of the child of the “lowest yet” affords her sympathy for Sethe’s predicament. According to Morrison, “Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (*Beloved*, 243). Specifically, the idea of her own dead infant returning from the dead to torment her motivates Ella to organize the women of Cincinnati. As Rushdy explains, “Ella, like the matured Denver, has outgrown the need to dwell on the past...By registering her narrative within a framework of determinism and forgiveness, Ella has learned how to free herself. She offers that possibility to Sethe.”<sup>20</sup>

When Sethe steps outside, she sees Bodwin coming to drive Denver to work. He is wearing a wide brimmed hat. Eighteen years earlier, Sethe recognized the coming of schoolteacher from the hat he wore. As though reliving the day of the infanticide, Sethe attempts to attack Bodwin, the perceived threat, with an ice pick but is intercepted by the community women, including Denver. During the commotion, Beloved disappears.

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<sup>20</sup> Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *American Literature* 64, no. 3 (September 1992): 584.

## Paul D

While most of *Beloved* revolves around Sethe and her family, Morrison also relates Paul D's experience between the time he last saw Sethe and his arrival at 124. Paul D's brother was sold to pay debts after Mr. Garner's death (*Beloved*, 9). After the failed runaway attempt, Paul D is sold to a man named Brandywine, whom Paul D attempts to kill while traveling on a slave coffle. He is sent to a prison in Alfred, Georgia, where prisoners are held in trenches outfitted with wooden boxes that have doors made of bars that could be lifted "like a cage." The prisoners remain shackled and chained at all times, during the day's work detail and at night in the boxes. During his incarceration, Paul D witnesses the sexual abuse of other prisoners by guards. Paul D and his fellow prisoners are locked in their boxes during a torrential rain, which they use as an opportunity to escape by diving under the bars. The fates of all forty-six men chained together rest with their fellow prisoners. As Morrison describes, "some lost direction and their neighbors, feeling the confused pull of the chain snatched them around. For if one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none" (*Beloved*, 102-103).

The escapees from prison and from slavery are aided by fellow fugitives described as "a camp of sick Cherokee for whom a rose was named" (*Beloved*, 104). The Cherokee who remain in Georgia and help the ex-prisoners remove their chains have resisted relocation to Oklahoma. Their current bout with disease is less severe than "the one that had killed half their number two hundred years earlier." Morrison uses that first pandemic and the subsequent outbreak to frame two centuries of Cherokee history, particularly their relations with white colonists and later the U.S. government, which dispossessed the Cherokee of their ancestral homelands. Of that betrayal Morrison writes, "The forced move to the Arkansas River, insisted upon by the same president they fought for against the Creek, destroyed another quarter of their already shattered number" (*Beloved*, 104). The illness at the time of Paul D's encounter is, according to Morrison, "a mere inconvenience compared to the devastation they

remembered” (*Beloved*, 104). As none of the Cherokee Paul D encounters could have been a primary witness to the epidemic of two hundred years earlier, Morrison here evokes cultural memory and the Cherokee’s group observance of collective trauma.

After leaving the camp, Paul D travels north to Delaware. The remainder of his story is told after Beloved’s disappearance. He spent three years in hiding in Wilmington, then during the Civil War, he set out to join a black regiment from Tennessee. Instead, he joined a different regiment from New Jersey that ultimately disbanded over the question of whether the soldiers should be allowed to carry guns. He was seized by an agent from Northpoint Bank and Railway, re-enslaved and sent back to labor in Delaware for a year until the bank either sold or leased him to the Confederate government for three hundred dollars. In Alabama, he retrieved Confederate wounded, described as “mostly young men, some children,” from the battlefield. His work elicited conflicting emotions—sympathy for the casualties but also shame that he felt “pity for what he imagined were the sons of the guards in Alfred, Georgia” (*Beloved*, 254). He reflects that he made five escape attempts—“from Sweet Home, from Brandywine, from Alfred, Georgia, from Wilmington, from Northpoint”—none of which resulted in “one permanent success” (*Beloved*, 254). Yet “in all those escapes,” writes Morrison, Paul D “could not help being astonished by the beauty of his land that was not his,” a land that Paul D “tried hard not to love” (*Beloved*, 254). The end of the Civil War found Paul D in Selma, Alabama, where he had been impressed to a foundry. As he and two black ex-soldiers walk from Selma to Mobile, Paul D and his companions see a dozen murdered black people, including two women and four little boys. According to Morrison, “The Yankees in control left the Rebels out of control (*Beloved*, 254).” In 1873, white supremacist violence is still rampant in the state of Ohio. One reason for not turning Beloved out on her own is the potential danger from terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan.

## **“Disremembered and Unaccounted For”**

After the disappearance of Beloved, Sethe retreats to what had been Baby Suggs’s bed, where she essentially assumes Baby Suggs’s former role. Alarmed by what he fears is her resignation toward death, Paul D tells Sethe, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (*Beloved*, 258). In the final chapter, Morrison records how Beloved is forgotten “like a bad dream” (*Beloved*, 259). The refrain, “It was not a story to pass on,” suggests Beloved’s existence becomes unspeakable, while Morrison describes Beloved as “disremembered and unaccounted for.” Where the novel has been concerned either with the past or a perpetual present, the need for a future expressed by Paul D implies a desire for liberation from the enslaved past. Paul D’s desire for a future, coupled the community’s collective disremembering of Beloved because “remembering seemed unwise” suggests forgetting the traumas of slavery, as a form of self-preservation for the people who experienced them.

## Chapter 10

### Slavery and the Civil War in the 1990s: From Ken Burns to *Cold Mountain*, a Decade of Narrative Response to *The Killer Angels*

When it premiered on PBS in September 1990, nearly forty million people tuned to at least one episode of Ken Burns's nine-part documentary *The Civil War*, making it the most watched PBS program of all time. Syndicated columnist George F. Will wrote of the series, "If better use has ever been made of television, I have not seen it and do not expect to see better until Burns turns his prodigious talents to his next project."<sup>1</sup> The film, which was inspired by Burns's reading of *The Killer Angels*, renewed interest in the Civil War era. It also helped spawn a series of projects based on Shaara's novel that significantly revised *The Killer Angels*' interpretation of the war and slavery's role in it. In *The Civil War*, in fact, Burns rejects the cynicism of *The Killer Angels* for a narrative that ultimately celebrates the survival of the Union and the abatement of sectional antipathy.

From 1990 to 1994, *The Civil War* was honored more than forty times for achievements in film, television, and education. The awards included a Peabody, two Emmys, a People's Choice Award, and the inaugural Lincoln Prize for the best scholarship on the Civil War era.<sup>2</sup> The only film ever to win what has become one of the most prestigious prizes in the field of U.S. history, *The Civil War* also has drawn some of its harshest criticism from academic historians. Still, in nearly twenty-five years since its release, *The Civil War* has endured in popularity. It has been screened so often in history courses at every educational level that Ken Burns and his collaborators have become the most influential arbiters of Civil War memory in the late twentieth century and beyond.

As the series aired over five consecutive nights on public television, *The Civil War* became a

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<sup>1</sup> George F. Will, "A Masterpiece on the Civil War," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1990, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>2</sup> *The Civil War*, list of film honors, Florentine Films, <http://www.florentinefilms.com/ffpages/FFIntro-frameset.html>.

pop culture sensation. The week after the documentary aired, *Newsweek* dedicated its cover story to *The Civil War*.<sup>3</sup> In December, when PBS rebroadcast the series, celebrity magazine *People* named Ken Burns to its list of the year's "twenty-five most intriguing" persons and tracked down living decedents of the film's major historical figures.<sup>4</sup> In an unusual testament to the film's popularity, one amorous admirer composed a love poem to the series' most featured commentator; the poet concluded each verse with the line, "I'm saving myself for Shelby Foote."<sup>5</sup> More traditional fan mail also arrived en masse. In 1996, Burns estimated that he had received more than 6,000 letters from high school teachers alone.<sup>6</sup> Shortly after its initial broadcast, the film also prompted a surge in Civil War book sales. Among these, the film's companion book became a bestseller, even at \$50 a copy. Shelby Foote's three-volume narrative history sold 100,000 copies in the first six months after the film aired, compared to 15,000 copies in the previous fifteen years. By 1994, *The Civil War* videotapes had sold more than one million copies. Burns called it "the bestselling nonfiction documentary series on history ever made."<sup>7</sup>

From the outset, Burns's film posits the centrality of the Civil War in American history and life. In the opening episode, Shelby Foote declares the Civil War the event that defined America, the "crossroads of our being." Any understanding of the "American character of the twentieth century," he insists, must begin with a study of the Civil War. Though the film never actually explores that twentieth

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<sup>3</sup> Jerry Adler et al., "Revisiting the Civil War," *Newsweek*, October 8, 1990, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>4</sup> "Ken Burns: With the Civil War, He Succeeded in Uniting the States—in Acclaim," *People*, December 31, 1990, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20114122,00.html>; "Children of the Blue & Gray: The Old Soldiers Faded Away, but Their Kin Live On, Reminding Us of the War a TV Series Recaptured," *People*, December 31, 1990, <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20114150,00.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Blumenfeld "After 'The Civil War' No Peace; Unlikely Celebs, Squinting in the Spotlight a Year Later," *The Washington Post*, September 22, 1991, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Burns, "Four O'Clock in the Mourning Courage," in *Ken Burns's the Civil War: Historians Respond*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 180.

<sup>7</sup> Gary R. Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave for St. Martin's Press, 2001), 6-7; David Thelen, "The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (December 1994): 1050, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2081444>.



century connection, the last episode features a segment with historian Barbara Fields, who asserts an imperative for “we today” to understand the meaning of the war to the generation who fought it and to continue their work toward social equality. While Fields and Foote generally present competing commentaries on the war, these two segments operate as parallel sound bites. Whatever else the film does, it begins and ends with an affirmation of the Civil War’s enduring relevance and asserts the necessity for understanding what Foote, and Burns through him, figures as the crux of American identity.

Though *The Civil War* occasionally incorporates archival footage of veterans’ reunions, old newsreels, or landscapes, the film’s most prominent visual elements are period photographs reshot with a cinematic technique now synonymous with Burns’s filmmaking. The camera adds the illusion of motion as it tilts, zooms, or moves panoramically over still images. Sound effects, some as subtle as the rustling of leaves, also animate the scenes.<sup>8</sup> Author David McCullough narrates the film as a cast of readers vivify speech, letter, and diary excerpts. They are accompanied by a Grammy-winning musical soundtrack. For all of this, one reviewer pronounced *The Civil War* a “video miracle.”<sup>9</sup> Another explained, “What’s so vital and rewarding about the film is the way Burns makes you feel the war and the wartime world, the way he evokes the experience of those who lived through it, and those who died in it.”<sup>10</sup>

The son of a cultural anthropologist who once considered an academic career in the same discipline, Ken Burns describes his work as an “emotional archaeology” and says he strives to

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<sup>8</sup> “A Conversation With Ken Burns,” Disc 1, *The Civil War*, directed by Ken Burns (Burbank, CA: PBS Home Video; Distributed by Paramount Home Entertainment, 2004, DVD).

<sup>9</sup> H. F. Waters, “The American Mosaic,” *Newsweek*, September 17, 1990, 68, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Shales, “The Civil War Drama; the Heroic Retelling of a Nation’s Agony,” *The Washington Post*, September 23, 1990, LexisNexis Academic.

“excavate” the feelings of the past, along with the facts.<sup>11</sup> He believes this emotional connection renders history meaningful and interesting to a large popular audience.<sup>12</sup> Though his films are rendered in a documentary format, Burns manipulates the images, words, and music to elicit just such an emotional response from viewers. Take for instance the letter that concludes the first episode.<sup>13</sup> As he prepared to decamp from Washington in July 1861, Major Sullivan Ballou, of Rhode Island, wrote a letter to his wife that he intended for her to read in the event of his death. Accompanied by the film’s dolorous violin theme and photographs of soldiers and their families, the letter expresses Ballou’s gratitude for the couple’s happy moments together and regrets that he will not watch their sons “grow to honorable manhood.”<sup>14</sup> It also asks forgiveness and attempts consolation: “Sarah, my love for you is deathless...If I do not return...never forget how much I loved you nor that when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name.” A week after he wrote the letter, narrator McCullough reveals, Sullivan Ballou died at the First Battle of Bull Run.<sup>15</sup> Before the initial broadcast, one reviewer warned, “If you make it dry-eyed through the eloquent and heartfelt letter...your ducts must be out of order.”<sup>16</sup> After the episode aired, a contributor to the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* claimed, “You could hear the whole country gulp when that letter was read.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America*, 28; Thomas Cripps, “Historical Truth: An Interview with Ken Burns,” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (June 1995), 746-747, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2168603>.

<sup>12</sup> Thelen, “The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns,” 1032.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Brent Toplin similarly cites the Sullivan Ballou letter as an example of Burns’s emotional history; see Robert Brent Toplin, introduction to Toplin, *Ken Burns’s the Civil War: Historians Respond*, xxii.

<sup>14</sup> “Honorable Manhood,” in “Episode One: The Cause,” Burns, *The Civil War*.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Paynter, “Tears again for the Civil War; PBS Series Takes a Stirring Look at a Nation Torn,” *Seattle (WA) Post-Intelligencer* September 20, 1990, Lexis Nexis Academic.

<sup>17</sup> Robert MacNeil et al., transcript of “Budget Battle; Priming the Pump; for the People; Fanning the Flames; Blue and Gray,” *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* October 16, 1990, LexisNexis Academic. In response to viewer requests, Boston PBS affiliate WGBH replayed the Ballou segment at the end of the series’ first broadcast. A San Diego station offered calligraphies of the letter during its 1991 pledge drive. That same year, *The Washington Post* published a transcription of the

The stories Burns tells on film are inextricably bound to the personal loss that shaped his sense of self, his work, and his understanding of the Civil War. Burns's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer when he was three years old; she died in 1964, when Ken was eleven.<sup>18</sup> Awareness of what he describes as that "overhanging imminent tragedy" became the ethos of Burns's family and his childhood.<sup>19</sup> Often explaining the sentimentalism of his films as a response to his mother's death, Burns compares the war to his own childhood experience. "There has never been a moment," he has said, "when our country has not been in the consequences of that battle, just as my life has never been free of the consequences of my mother's death. I think I brought a very emotional relationship to my exploration of the Civil War that relates very clearly to my own personal psychology."<sup>20</sup> Burns has also likened historical inquiry to a kind of national therapy and says he loves the "cathartic cleansing" his films facilitate.<sup>21</sup> With echoes of the parental loss he identifies as the most formative event of his life, Burns consistently characterizes the Civil War as the childhood trauma of the nation.<sup>22</sup>

When he penned his now famous letter, Sullivan Ballou also meant to justify his venture into harm's way. He assured his wife that his love was eternal. Whether his country would exist in the same perpetuity was another matter. "I know how American civilization now leans upon the triumph of the government," he wrote, "and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood

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letter on July 14, the 130th anniversary of its composition. Susan Bickelhaupt, "Civil War Elegy Captivates TV Viewers," *The Boston Globe* September 29, 1990, LexisNexis Academic; Don Freeman, "Point of View," *The San Diego (CA) Union-Tribune*, March 6, 1991, LexisNexis Academic; "Poignant, Personal Footnote," *The Washington Post*, July 14, 1991, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>18</sup> Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America*, 28.

<sup>19</sup> "A Conversation With Ken Burns," Disc 1, *The Civil War*.

<sup>20</sup> Thelen, *The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns*, 1046.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 1049; "A Conversation With Ken Burns," Disc 1, Burns, *The Civil War*.

<sup>22</sup> "A Conversation With Ken Burns," Disc 1, Burns, *The Civil War*; Thelen, *The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns*, 1046; David Klinghoffer, "Civil War Crazy; PBS Series is Just the Tip of the Mania," *The Washington Times*, September 21, 1990, LexisNexis Academic; David Morris, "Filmmaker Wins Prize for Civil War Scholarship, Beating 41 Books, Manuscripts," *The Associated Press*, February 9, 1991, LexisNexis Academic; Adler et al., "Revisiting the Civil War"; Ken Burns, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, PBS, September 25, 2002.

and suffering of the Revolution.”<sup>23</sup> Like other Federal volunteers, Ballou understood that if secession prevailed, it would undermine the principles of republican government for all time.<sup>24</sup> Weighing the certainty of his familial affection against the danger of national dissolution, Ballou judged the country, with its very existence in jeopardy, to have the more exigent claim. His willingness to “lay down all my joys of this life to help maintain this government” and to satisfy a debt to the founders reveals Ballou’s devotion to the “Union Cause.” This interpretive tradition, writes Gary Gallagher, “framed the war as preeminently an effort to maintain a viable republic in the face of secessionist actions that threatened both the work of the Founders and, by extension, the future of democracy in a world that had yet to embrace self-rule by a free people.”<sup>25</sup> In a culture where U.S. citizens now rest secure in the continuation of democratic government, Hollywood feature films, according to Gallagher, have essentially abandoned this narrative.<sup>26</sup> The Union Cause appears at the forefront of the Sullivan Ballou letter, however, and Burns purposely situated that missive as “the fulcrum, the pivot around which the whole meaning of the war and our series would rest.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, Burns’s documentary elevates to its principal narrative what Hollywood movies have generally excised—the crisis of Union survival.

That first episode of *The Civil War*, titled “The Cause,” represents slavery as the great national menace that the United States failed to resolve at its founding and the dispute over which eleven states sought to disjoin the country. In a rare discussion of historical process, narrator David McCullough explains how the invention of the cotton gin made a lucrative industry of a once languishing institution.

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<sup>23</sup> “Honorable Manhood,” in “Episode One: The Cause,” *The Civil War*.

<sup>24</sup> Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 40.

<sup>25</sup> Gary Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 12, 92.

<sup>27</sup> “Commentary Track 7: Honorable Manhood,” Special Features: Episode One Commentary Tracks, Disc 1, Burns, *The Civil War*.

A brief account of slavery foregrounds deprivation, disease, short life expectancy, and exhausting work routines. The auction block stands for the entire slave market, where perspective buyers examine bondspeople as “a jockey examines a horse.” A sound recording features the testimony of an ex-slave: If faced with the possibility of re-enslavement, he would choose suicide. The segment emphasizes the dehumanizing character of slavery and acknowledges, though hastily, slaves’ efforts at resistance, including their struggle to keep families intact and to create their own culture “under the worst of conditions.”<sup>28</sup> Yet the sketch of slave life, especially compared with the battle recreations, is one-dimensional. The film reinforces the misconception of antebellum cotton field labor as the universal model of slavery. Probably because it was intended and continues to be used as a teaching tool for students as early as elementary school, the film avoids any obvious discussion of sexual politics but also any indication that men and women experienced bondage differently. In *The Civil War*, slavery is at turns “monstrous,” dehumanizing, and the country’s original sin, but it is not what Burns or his film defines as the national trauma. Historian Barbara Fields appears throughout *The Civil War* and argues the war’s true significance could be found on the battlefield only to the degree that the combatants had “joined a discussion about something higher, about humanity, about human dignity, about human freedom.”<sup>29</sup> Yet as Ellen Carol DuBois has argued, the story of the Civil War as “the battle to abolish slavery, gets remarkably short shrift.”<sup>30</sup> Burns and script co-writer Geoffrey Ward set out to tell a story with a military focus. As that narrative unfolds, slavery and emancipation become the story of that “something higher” but remain ancillary to the fact that “Americans slaughtered one another other wholesale, here, in America.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “All Night Forever” in “Episode One: The Cause,” Burns *The Civil War*.

<sup>29</sup> “*The Civil War* Series Title,” Episode One: The Cause,” Burns, *The Civil War*.

<sup>30</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois, review of *The Civil War*, by Ken Burns, *American Historical Review*, 96, No. 4 (October 1991): 1141, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2165010>.

In *The Civil War*, artist paintings, not photographs illustrate the military engagements. Used primarily for portrait making, cameras of the 1860s required long exposures to achieve a single clear image. Though the technology could not capture the battle itself, still images of wounded and lifeless soldiers recorded the aftermath. In 1862, Antietam became the first U.S. battlefield photographed before burial details interred the dead.<sup>32</sup> When Mathew Brady exhibited the images in his Manhattan gallery, a *New York Times* reporter, who is also quoted in the film, wrote that the collection had “done something to bring home the terrible reality and earnestness of the war.” If the photographer had not “brought the dead bodies and laid them at our dooryards and along the streets,” the reporter wrote, “he has done something very like it.”<sup>33</sup>

*Washington Post* columnist David Broder echoed the sentiments 128 years later when Burns reintroduced these and other casualty photographs to viewers of *The Civil War*. “Never, I suspect, have millions of Americans been exposed to such a volume of unromanticized scenes of death in battle,” Broder wrote. In September 1990, the message was a timely one. As the United States contemplated war with Iraq, Broder applauded Burns and PBS for the “signal service” they had done the country by “reminding us of the reality of the concentrated acts of violence we call war.”<sup>34</sup> In December, George F. Will, who had praised the film at the start of the television season, speculated that “a public wariness about war in the gulf” had arisen at least in part from the public’s “recent exposure” to photographs of Civil War casualties.<sup>35</sup> In Riyadh, while General Norman Schwarzkopf and his staff made final

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<sup>31</sup> “*The Civil War Series Title*,” Episode One: The Cause,” Burns, *The Civil War*.

<sup>32</sup> William A. Frassanito, *Antietam: The Photographic Legacy of America’s Bloodiest Day* (New York: Scribner, 1978), 17.

<sup>33</sup> The article incorrectly credited the images to Mathew Brady. The images were actually captured by Alexander Gardner and his assistant James F. Gibson. Ibid, 18, 51.

<sup>34</sup> David S. Broder, “A Lot to Learn from ‘the Civil War,’” *The Washington Post*, September 30, 1990, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>35</sup> George F. Will, “Exactly how Much Horror are Americans Ready for?” *The Sunday Oregonian* (Portland, OR), December 2, 1990, LexisNexis Academic.

preparations for Operation Desert Storm, they watched the set of *The Civil War* videos Defense Secretary Dick Cheney had left them as a Christmas present. Schwarzkopf later remembered, “Watching those tapes renewed my conviction that if I had to send my troops into battle, I would find a way to minimize the loss of life.”<sup>36</sup> In Washington, General Colin Powell told Schwarzkopf over the phone that the film had altered the popular mood and the public now had realistic expectations of what lay in store. “Thanks to Burns’s artistry,” Powell later recalled, “millions of Americans understood that, yes, you went to war for high principles, but you should not go into it with any romantic illusions.”<sup>37</sup>

Though much of the critical commentary singled out battlefield photographs, *The Civil War* recreates an entire world of combat, which is most vivid at the battle of Gettysburg. Ken Burns traces the genesis of the film to Christmas Day 1984, when he finished reading Michael Shaara’s *The Killer Angels*, closed the book, and announced his intention make a film that encompassed the entire Civil War.<sup>38</sup> The battle of Gettysburg, which is the focus of Shaara’s novel, consumed Burns’s waking thoughts and dreams. He recalled one in particular that positioned him all at once as “a safe aerial observer and right up the horrifying middle of things.” A few months later when he visited the battlefield for the first time, Burns “inexplicably” stopped his car, caught his bearings and realized he was at the center of Pickett’s charge. With Shaara’s account still resonant, he began running up the battlefield, retracing the route of Pickett’s division, until he reached the position of the Union guns. There, probably close to where Shaara said he sat under a tree and replayed the battle in his imagination, Burns wept. “No book, novel or nonfiction,” he later recalled, “had ever done that to me

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<sup>36</sup> Norman Schwarzkopf and Peter Petre, *It Doesn’t Take a Hero: The Autobiography of General Norman Schwarzkopf* (New York: Bantam, 1992), 395.

<sup>37</sup> Colin L. Powell and Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 492.

<sup>38</sup> “My Favorite Historical Novel,” *American Heritage* 43, no. 6 (October 1992), <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/my-favorite-historical-novel>.

before.”<sup>39</sup> Reading *The Killer Angels* and later visiting the Gettysburg battlefield, Burns made the emotional connection he considers it his lifework to translate for audiences. Not surprisingly, that three-day clash of armies is the artistic climax of *The Civil War*.

In “Episode Five: The Universe of Battle” Burns bombards his audience with the sights and sounds of combat. As it progresses, the narration is accompanied by sounds of gunshots. Private W.C. Ward of the Fourth Alabama describes the “sharp electric pain” of being shot, the “sinking sensation” of falling to the earth, darkness closing around him. A black and white live action sequence filmed while the camera operator darted downhill simulates what a soldier from the 20th Maine might have seen and heard as he charged down Little Round Top. Elsewhere, Private Robert H. Carter recalls in sensory fragments what seemed to him “a perfect hell on earth.” Carter’s description is first paired with a photograph of dead horses, then a dead soldier, a close-up of his wounds—the fatal shot seems literally to have torn the man in half—and finally, the severed hand lying next to him. All the while, sound effects —rifle reports, the shriek and explosion of artillery—tell of the still-raging battle. At Gettysburg, much as his troubling dreams did for Burns, the filmmakers thrust their audience into a hell-on-earth universe, where violence reduces men to “ghastly heaps” of the dead.<sup>40</sup>

As a prelude to Gettysburg, viewers also meet Daisy Turner, the daughter of former slave Alex Turner, who freed himself early in the war and joined a New Jersey cavalry regiment. One hundred four years old, blind and nearly deaf at the time of filming, Daisy Turner recites from memory “A Soldier’s Letter.”<sup>41</sup> Divided into four segments interspersed throughout the Gettysburg scenes, the poem tells of a

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “Gettysburg: The Second Day,” in “Episode Five: The Universe of Battle,” Burns and others, *The Civil War*.

<sup>41</sup> For the poem in its entirety, including verses not featured in *The Civil War*, see Mary C. Hovey, “A Soldier’s Letter,” in *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events*, volume eight, ed. Frank Moore (1865; GoogleBooks, 2008), 69-70, <http://books.google.com/books?id=MrITAAAAYAAJ&pg=RA1-PA69&dq=mary+c.+hovey+and+%22a+soldier's+letter%22&hl=en&sa=X&ei=PWEuU7XLDIPayAGAgIdwBw&ved=0CCoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=mary%20c.%20hovey%20and%20%22a%20soldier's%20letter%22&f=false>.



soldier killed a week after his nineteenth birthday. It is composed as a letter to the young man's mother. The authorial persona is a fellow serviceman, who despite a prefatory apology for "rough soldier words" bears sentimental witness to the youth's mortal wounding in battle, his final deathbed utterances, and his burial by the narrator. In his dying declaration, the beloved son and comrade relinquishes his earthly cares, prays for God's grace and whispers his last words, "Goodbye mother." During the Civil War, condolence letters like the one in the poem assured families that their loved one's passing conformed to notions of the Good Death. Taken as a sign that the families would be reunited in heaven, Drew Faust writes, "News of a Good Death, constituted the ultimate solace—the consoling promise of life everlasting."<sup>42</sup> As recited by Daisy Turner, "A Soldier's Letter," is a requiem for the dead, but one that reminds viewers of the redemptive cause of freedom even as the film immerses them in hellish combat.

True to his rejection of cynicism in his personal philosophy, Ken Burns confronts his audience with the human collateral of war, but not without an assurance of redemption, which he locates in the cause of emancipation.<sup>43</sup> "It could have been a very ugly, filthy war with no redeeming characteristics at all," says Barbara Fields in the introduction to Episode Three. But "the battle for emancipation and the people who pushed it forward...ennobled what otherwise would have been meaningless carnage into something higher." The episode, titled "Forever Free" concludes with the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation after the battle of Antietam. Historical chronology aside, the sequencing of battle carnage followed by what the segment terms "The Higher Object" anticipates a similar pairing in the film's most extended representation of battle. Appearing again, just before the battle of Gettysburg, Fields reminds viewers of that loftier purpose.

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<sup>42</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying," *The Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 1 (February 2001): 14, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3070083>.

<sup>43</sup> Burns once asserted that "cynicism is the single greatest disease in our country today," Gary Edgerton, "Ken Burns—A Conversation with Public Television's Resident Historian," *Journal of American Culture* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1995), 1, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (9509030535).

Yet even as the film narrative oscillates between the carnage of battle and the “Higher Object,” *The Civil War* shows less concern for the meaning of emancipation to enslaved men and women than for its significance to the nation as a whole. As Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, a Union soldier responds to the proclamation: “It was no longer a question of the Union as it *was*, that was to be re-established. It was the Union as it should be, that is to say washed clean from its original sin. We were no longer merely the soldiers of a political controversy. We were now the missionaries of a great work of redemption, the armed liberators of millions. The object was higher.”<sup>44</sup> Though the language seems to echo Fields, excerpts from Lincoln’s annual message to Congress ultimately frames “The Higher Object” within the fight for Union: “In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free, honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve.” The episode, which too strongly implies freedom as something conferred on bondpeople, ends with the Emancipation Proclamation being read in a contraband camp. The unattributed story is taken from *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, written by the white regimental commander Thomas Wentworth Higginson. In *Army Life*, Higginson recalls that once the proclamation was read, listeners joined in spontaneous singing of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” It seemed to Higginson the “choked voice of a race at last unloosed.”<sup>45</sup> As the latter quote stands in the film for former slaves’ reception of the proclamation, the filmmakers add a chorus of voices singing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” as though to suggest this song as the anthem of liberty heard throughout the camp. Higginson’s version depicts former slaves celebrating—according to the song lyrics—the “land where my fathers died” as their own native country, while the more militant “Battle Hymn” depicts a holy war of liberation. Either way, the supposedly unloosed voices are at best doubly mediated, first by Higginson, then by Burns and company.

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<sup>44</sup> “The Higher Object,” in “Episode 3: Forever Free,” Burns, *The Civil War*.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870; repr., East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), 31.

Though it might well be classed among various factual errors that appear throughout film, the hymn substitution suggests the conflict between historical methodology and the filmmaker's artistic license. That and the question of which stories about the Civil War merit retelling have often placed Burns in contentious and mutually critical relations with members of the academe. Their debates are most fully documented in *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond*. The volume consists of essays by academic historians with rebuttals by Burns and the film's main script writer, Geoffrey Ward.

In the Gettysburg segments, Burns intersperses, along with the recitation by Daisy Turner, the correspondence of the Batchelor family, which in a surprise twist reveals the survival of son Albert, whom viewers have been led to count among the fatalities. *The Civil War* employs the Batchelor correspondence as a counterpart to the death documented in the period photographs and the grief dramatized in Daisy Turner's poem. Unknown to viewers of *The Civil War*, one of those letters, as originally written by Thomas Batchelor to his son Albert, also carried news of the family's slaves. Despite much sickness during the summer, wrote the Louisiana planter in October 1862, "we are all well now or nearly so[.] I have lost only two little negroes since you left." Thomas feared that if Federal troops advanced to Red River Landing, he would be forced to move, though he did not know where to go or what to do with his belongings. From Baton Rouge to New Orleans, he wrote, the Federals had "taken all the negroes from the [plantations]" as well as "every thing valuable [and] broken them up entirely." Thomas considered these developments "stealing in the lowest degree."<sup>46</sup> On the day the battle of Gettysburg began, in a letter not quoted in the film, Thomas Batchelor wrote his daughter that he hoped she had "not suffered any by the Yanks coming," despite reports that the residents of the town of Clinton had "all been ruined." For his part, Thomas Batchelor wrote, "I have

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Batchelor to Albert Batchelor, Red River Landing, October 16, 1862, Albert A. Batchelor Papers, Mss. 919, 1293, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.

lost nearly all my negroes [and] a good many other things.”<sup>47</sup> Though the letter suggests the Batchelor family slaves, like Alex Turner, chose self-liberation, the story Burns chooses for the film is one of familial anguish with a happy ending. Though he elsewhere identifies slavery as the villain of *The Civil War*, Burns does not extend the indictment to slaveholders. As it elicits audience identification with a father and sons who seem to stand universally for the country, the film renders illegible both the Batchelor brothers’ Confederate service and the family’s enslavement of bondspeople. The fraternal recovery that apparently trumps the slaves’ story also foreshadows the film’s conclusion.

To his mission of emotional archeology, Burns once added that he saw his work as “trying to excavate what there is in our past that speaks to the ‘better angels’ in our nature, the unum and not the pluribus.”<sup>48</sup> Between the battle of Gettysburg and the siege of Vicksburg, *The Civil War* turns to the efforts of the U.S. Sanitary Commission. The segment relates the healing work of hospitals and is one of the few considerations of women in the war. The filmmakers might have inserted the content any number of places without compromising the film’s coherence. Appearing where it does, the segment suggests another alternative to the story of human destruction. Sanitary Commission organizer Mary Livermore summarizes the counternarrative: “If this war developed some of the most brutal, bestial, and devilish qualities lurking in the human race, it has also shown us how much of the angel there is in the best men and women.”<sup>49</sup>

Burns’s search for the better, redeeming aspects of human nature and of American identity leads him to revisit the words of Lincoln on the eve of war. Early in Episode Nine, narrator David McCullough tells viewers, “In April 1861, Abraham Lincoln had implored his countrymen not to go to

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Batchelor to My Dear Daughter, July 1, 1863, Albert A. Batchelor Papers, Mss. 919, 1293, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, LA.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Dale Jackson, “Ken Burns Puts His Special Spin on the Old Ball Game,” *Smithsonian* 25, no. 4 (July 1994), 38, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (9406307582).

<sup>49</sup> “She Ranks Me,” in “Episode Five: The Universe of Battle,” Burns, *The Civil War*.

war, to listen to the better angels of their nature. Now in April 1865, the bloodshed was finally coming to an end.”<sup>50</sup> As the film reprises the words of Lincoln’s first inaugural, *The Civil War* engages in a philosophical debate with the novel that inspired it. Lincoln’s address, the episode title, “The Better Angels of Our Nature,” and even Mary Livermore four episodes earlier evoke the “dignity of man,” the principle that underlies the personal conflict of Michael Shaara’s Chamberlain in *The Killer Angels*. Though Burns credits that novel as his *Civil War* inspiration, he refuses to concede to Michael Shaara’s parting vision of an innately corrupt humanity. Instead, the filmmaker traces the country’s redemption through the cessation of sectional antipathy.

The character of Michael Shaara’s novel that most captivated Burns, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, recurs infrequently but at symbolically important moments throughout *The Civil War*.<sup>51</sup> Beginning with his introduction in Episode One, Chamberlain acquires a mythic stature as the hero who, in the film’s overstatement, singlehandedly saved the Union army and “possibly the Union itself.”<sup>52</sup> After Gettysburg, Chamberlain disappears until Episode Nine, where he witnesses enduring sectional enmity and, ultimately, the cessation of that hostility. As Chamberlain declares the fiftieth anniversary Gettysburg reunion a “transcendental experience” and a “radiant fellowship of the fallen,” narrator McCullough follows shortly with the facts of Chamberlain’s death and the pronouncement “the war was over.”<sup>53</sup> The film locates the war’s definitive end not at the 1865 surrender but in the much later passing of sectional antipathy, signaled by the “brotherly love and affection” that is purported to have been evident at the Gettysburg reunion. There, the film implies, the country achieved a kind of healing from the trauma of Civil War, and the “better angels of our nature” finally prevailed in the

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<sup>50</sup> “Prologue,” in “Episode Nine: The Better Angels of Our Natures,” Burns, *The Civil War*.

<sup>51</sup> Burns, “Four O’Clock in the Mourning Courage,” in Toplin, *Ken Burns’s the Civil War: Historians Respond*, 157.

<sup>52</sup> “Prologue” in “Episode One: The Cause,” Burns, *The Civil War*.

<sup>53</sup> “Picklocks of Biographers,” in “Episode Nine: The Better Angels of Our Natures,” Burns *The Civil War*.

realization of friendship prescribed by Lincoln's First Inaugural. While the final episode aims for just the sort of "cathartic cleansing" Burns favors in his films, the celebration of national reunion is deeply problematic.

In the First Inaugural, Lincoln attempted to conciliate Southerners agitating for secession. In his first two drafts, he concluded by placing the responsibility of a potential war in the hands of secessionists — "With you, and not with me, is the solemn question of 'Shall it be peace, or a sword?'" Lincoln wrote. Suggesting this conclusion might do more to provoke than calm secessionist fervor, soon-to-be Secretary of State William Seward proposed two alternate endings, one of which Lincoln reworked into the words he spoke on Inauguration Day.<sup>54</sup> "We are not enemies, but friends" Lincoln told the secessionists and repeated for emphasis, "We must not be enemies." The lines that followed emphasized a common history, the endurance of Union and national "bonds of affection." With the hope that "every living heart and hearthstone" would "again be touched...by the better angels of our nature," Lincoln advocated for Union and national unity. But also on Seward's advice, the new president attempted further accommodation to slaveholders. He averred that he did not object to a Constitutional Amendment pending before Congress that would have protected slavery in the states forever.<sup>55</sup> With beguiling eloquence, Lincoln proposed a peace that would have rested on the perpetual enslavement of black Americans. The appeal to the "better angels of our nature" abdicated the very principles Lincoln meant to preserve. As *The Civil War* attempts to bring the story full circle with a restored Union and sectional friendship, the film ignores how national reunion similarly betrayed principles that gave the war its higher purpose.

As rituals of Civil War memory, veterans' reunions signified a sectional reconciliation of the country but one that happened as the U.S. government and people like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.,

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<sup>54</sup> Ronald C. White Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 75-76.

<sup>55</sup> John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Twelve, 2008), 217.

whose reminiscence opens the film, abandoned their commitment to racial equality. As David Blight has shown, the fiftieth anniversary Gettysburg reunion, far from realizing the highest ideals of America, was emblematic of the racial segregation that prevailed in the country at that time.<sup>56</sup> Each time the *Civil War* turns to film footage of aged survivors, it is a testament to the survival of the nation beyond what Burns characterizes as its childhood trauma. The problem, explains Eric Foner, is that “Reunion represented a substantial retreat from the Reconstruction ideal of a color blind citizenship. The road to reunion was paved with the broken dreams of black Americans, and the betrayal of those dreams was indispensable to the process of reunion as it actually took place.”<sup>57</sup> *The Civil War* acknowledges postwar white supremacist violence, but the failure of Reconstruction is covered in a few sentences: “The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was followed by a 14<sup>th</sup> and a 15<sup>th</sup> promising full citizenship and due process for all American men, white and black, but the promises were soon overlooked in the scramble for a new prosperity, and white supremacy was brutally reimposed throughout the old Confederacy. The white South won that war of attrition. It would take another century before blacks gained back the ground for which so many had given their lives.”<sup>58</sup> As the film pays brief attention to the betrayal of African American civil rights through extralegal violence, “that war of attrition” becomes a separate struggle, divorced from the Civil War. After positing various interpretations of Civil War legacy, Burns allows the final word to Shelby Foote. Foote reads a passage from his civil war trilogy that tells of a South Carolina veteran, Sergeant Barry Benson, who recalled the war for his memoirs and began to wish he could relive it. The veteran imagines that in death, the old soldiers meet again in Valhalla, where they reenact their former battles but suffer no casualties.<sup>59</sup> In *The Killer Angels*, the moment of apostasy

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<sup>56</sup> Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 9, 385-387.

<sup>57</sup> Eric Foner, “Ken Burns and the Romance of Reunion,” in Toplin, *Ken Burns’s the Civil War: Historians Respond*, 113.

<sup>58</sup> “Was it Not Real,” in “Episode 9: The Better Angels of Our Nature,” Burns, *The Civil War*.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. The passage Foote reads is an excerpt from Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative: Red River to Appomattox*

occurs as Chamberlain learns of Kilrain's death and finds himself incapable of belief in heaven, or by extension his vision of an America that honors the dignity of man. As Burns closes the film with a fantasy of the warrior's heaven, he seemingly affirms his own faith in the American ideal. Yet in doing so, the film avoids what should be an obvious and troubling question: What do continued racial violence and the abandonment of "the higher object" mean for the wartime carnage and the nation that survived it?

As the film fueled interest in the Civil War, popular discussions associated Burns, his documentary, and the Civil War with the cultural myths of Homer. Investigating the cultural fascination with the Civil War, Mark Munro of the *Boston Globe*, wrote, "Clearly, that worst of American wars persists as our Homeric period."<sup>60</sup> One of the film's most laudatory reviewers, George Will, declared of *The Civil War*, "Our Iliad has found its Homer." But historian C. Vann Woodward, despite being one of Burns's strongest academic supporters, wrote in his topical essay for *The Civil War* companion book, "A Homer for our Civil War has yet to turn up."<sup>61</sup> The Homeric analogy would recur later in the decade, but until then, popular interest in Civil War would revisit old favorites, create a market for questionable "sequels," and continue to focus on battle narratives.

## **The Battle of Gettysburg on Film**

In the early 1990s, director Ron Maxwell partnered with media magnate Ted Turner to make a film based on *The Killer Angels*. Maxwell pitched the project to television networks and movie studios

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(1974; New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 1048.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Munro, "The Civil War Still Haunts Us," *The Boston Globe*, August 19, 1990, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>61</sup> Will, *A Masterpiece on the Civil War*; C. Vann Woodward, "What the War Made Us," in Geoffrey C. Ward, Ken Burns and Ric Burns, *The Civil War*, 1st Vintage Civil War library ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 325.



for more than a decade but could not find a backer to finance the project. Finally, with the success of Burns's documentary and the popularity of the Civil War, ABC approved the project but canceled it after a biopic of George Custer flopped in ratings. Then, after meeting them at separate Civil War events, Ken Burns told Turner—well known as a Civil War enthusiast—about Maxwell's project; Turner eventually agreed to finance the adaptation of *The Killer Angels*.<sup>62</sup> The resulting film *Gettysburg* was originally planned as a miniseries, but Turner had his eye on an Oscar and decided to release the movie in theaters before broadcasting it on television.<sup>63</sup> The film, which cost \$20 million to make, grossed only \$12 million at the domestic box office but fared better on television.<sup>64</sup> When it aired on TNT in January 1994, the network estimated its first broadcast attracted twenty-three million viewers, making it the most popular film to air on basic cable at that time.<sup>65</sup>

Starting with its theatrical release in 1993, *Gettysburg* received mixed reviews, but film and television critics seemed to agree on three fronts. Most considered Jeff Daniels's portrayal of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain to be the standout performance of the film.<sup>66</sup> Many shared the assessment of

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Jorgensen, "Gettysburg: How a Prize-Winning Novel Became a Motion Picture; The Great Battle to bring the Great Battle to Screen," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, November/December 1993, 46; John Hartl, "Long Aborning, New Civil War Film 'Gettysburg' Opens Friday In Seattle," *Seattle (WA) Times*, October 6, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Jeannie Williams, "Ted Turner Leads 'Gettysburg' Charge," *USA Today*, September 30, 1993, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>63</sup> Kirk Honeycutt, "New Line to March out 'Gettysburg,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, July 9, 1993, LexisNexis Academic. Peter Keough, "'Gettysburg' Worth the Fight; Dream Fulfilled In Heroic Film," *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 24, 1993, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>64</sup> On box office earnings, see Bruce Haring, "VCR; Turner Vid Preps 'Gettysburg' rollout," *Variety*, January 10, 1994 – January 16, 1994, LexisNexis Academic; John Hartl, "TNT's 'Gettysburg' Offers A Little Extra From Movie," *The Seattle (WA) Times*, June 26, 1994, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>65</sup> "Popular 'Gettysburg' Returns To Cable TV," *The Columbian* (Vancouver, WA), July 18, 1994, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>66</sup> Daniel M. Kimmel, review of *Gettysburg*, *Daily Variety*, September 22, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; David Hunter, "'Gettysburg,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, September 24, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Daniel M. Kimmel, "'Gettysburg' Captures History," *Variety*, October 4, 1993 - October 10, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Frank Gabrenya, "'Gettysburg' A Grind; Four-Hour Epic Too Long, Too Clean For War Movie," *Columbus (OH) Dispatch*, October 8, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Bruce Westbrook, "At The Movies; You May Fight Boredom In Marathon 'Gettysburg,'" *The Houston (TX) Chronicle*, October 8, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Stephen Holden, "When War Was All Glory and Bands and Death," *New York Times*, October 8, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Kristi Turnquist, "'Gettysburg' Falls Flat," *The Oregonian*

Hal Hinson that “the entire cast falls victim to some of the worst facial hair in movie history.”<sup>67</sup> And some unaccountably judged the film a faithful adaptation of Michael Shaara’s novel.<sup>68</sup> The film does borrow some of the novel’s speeches and dialogue but with notable changes. Private Joseph Bucklin still speaks his grievances, minus the profanity of the novel.<sup>69</sup> Chamberlain still persuades most of the mutineers to join the imminent battle, but on the contradiction between freedom and army hierarchy, Maxwell’s colonel is mum. Chamberlain’s faith in America and in the “dignity of man” becomes simply “the idea that we all have value.”<sup>70</sup> Producers also renamed the film after focus groups incorrectly supposed *The Killer Angels* to be a film about motorcycle riders.<sup>71</sup> Dropping the original title might have deflated Michael Shaara’s commentary on the nature of humanity, but *Gettysburg* discards that, too. The Hamlet-like cynicism, the multiple crises of faith, slavery as the acknowledged cause of dispute, and generally most of what distinguishes the novel as a major revision of Civil War

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(Portland, Oregon), October 8, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Marylynn Uricchio, “Nothing Civil About It; ‘Gettysburg’ Brings A Deadly Battle To Life,” *Pittsburgh (PA) Post-Gazette*, October 8, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; John Hartl, “The Sweep Of Battle: ‘Gettysburg’ Captures The Passions Of War Although It Shows Some Miniseries Bloat,” *The Seattle (WA)Times*, October 8, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Jeff Strickler, “Too much of ‘Gettysburg’ is Self-Indulgent,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), October 8, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Curtis Wilkie, “Gettysburg Addressed; Old Enough to Remember Aged Confederate Soldiers, a Southerner Goes to the Movies and Reflects on his Sense of Loss,” *Boston Globe*, October 24, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Robert Bianco, Methodical ‘Gettysburg’ Will Reward Your Patience,” *Pittsburgh (PA) Post-Gazette*, June 26, 1994, LexisNexis Academic; Peter S. Carmichael, “The Classics: Good History Survives Wooden Dialog in Gettysburg, Civil War Times, October 2004, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (14032014).

<sup>67</sup> Hal Hinson, “‘Gettysburg’: Battle Fatigued,” *The Washington Post*, October 8, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; David Hunter “‘Gettysburg,’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 24, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Westbrook, “At The Movies; You May Fight Boredom In Marathon ‘Gettysburg’”; Turnquist, “‘Gettysburg’ Falls Flat”; Uricchio, “Nothing Civil About It”; Mark Green, “The Life of an Extra on the Set of ‘Gettysburg,’” *Washington Times*, October 9, 1993, LexisNexis; “‘Gettysburg’ Premieres on TNT,” *Buffalo (NY)News*, June 26, 1994, LexisNexis Academic; Robert Bianco, Methodical ‘Gettysburg’ Will Reward Your Patience.”

<sup>68</sup> Greg Pierce, “Some Observations About the Film ‘Gettysburg,’” *Washington Times*, July 24, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Gary Arnold, “‘Gettysburg’: A Sense of Being There; Fateful Battle is Stirring Epic,” *Washington Times*, October 8, 1993, LexisNexis Academic; Wilkie, “Gettysburg Addressed; Old Enough to Remember Aged Confederate Soldiers, a Southerner Goes to the Movies and Reflects on his Sense of Loss”; Peter S. Carmichael, “The Classics: Good History Survives Wooden Dialog in Gettysburg.”

<sup>69</sup> “Used by Idiots” in *Gettysburg*, dir., Ronald F. Maxwell (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000, DVD).

<sup>70</sup> “What We’re Fighting For” in Maxwell, *Gettysburg*.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press 2003), 149.

memory goes missing from *Gettysburg*.

Longstreet's disaffection with Lee, which increases steadily in *Angels* is largely muted in the film, as is Lee's pursuit of a chivalric code at the expense of his men's lives. In their final debate about the third day's attack, the closest the dialogue comes to the near-insubordination of the novel is Longstreet's suggestion, phrased interrogatively, that perhaps A.P. Hill should lead the attack. For that, Longstreet quickly apologizes and dismisses the idea as his own excessive caution. His inner misgivings go unexpressed and the only doubt he voices is about his own ability, never in Lee as commander. Likewise, when the failure becomes apparent, the men around him exculpate Lee. Pickett's bitterness is relegated to the film's pictorial epilogue. To be sure, Maxwell's Longstreet clearly divines the disaster in which he is about to participate, but with his crisis of faith illegible and with Lee essentially relieved of external blame, *Gettysburg* avoids the critical narrative reversals of *The Killer Angels*.

Maxwell retains an encounter between Union soldiers and a man presumed to be a runaway slave but shortens the scene and minimizes its significance to Chamberlain's story. The representation of the wounded black man solely from the perspective of white soldiers is easily the most objectionable component of Michael Shaara's novel, but the author uses the appearance of the unnamed man, his interactions with the soldiers, and his wounding by a Gettysburg resident to interrogate Chamberlain's idealism and that of a nation that betrays its founding principles. Nothing remotely similar occurs in the film. Also absent from *Gettysburg* is Chamberlain's recollection of a debate with pro-slavery ideologues that revealed the unabashedly dehumanizing character of slavery. Had Maxwell merely rejected *The Killer Angels*' language of otherness or the ostensible objectification of its one black character, he might have found other ways to highlight the fundamental paradox of a slaveholding republic. Instead, the film remains as uncritical of that contradiction as it does of slavery itself, and the purpose of the supposed-slave encounter remains ambiguous. In July 1993, the director's cut was

screened for the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College. Afterward, the local newspaper, the *Gettysburg Times*, reported that one viewer “questioned the meaning of [the] scene where Union troops discover and heckle a black man for no reason.”<sup>72</sup>

As in *The Killer Angels*, the British military observer Arthur Freemantle provides the principal commentary on the war; lest the *Gettysburg* Freemantle utter anything as objectionable as the failure of the founding, he and Longstreet emphasize the essential sameness of the combatants while marginalizing slavery. Freemantle’s observation that Southerners—and in the film, Northerners alike—are really “transplanted Englishmen” turns to a ventriloquism of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, which in 1863, hadn’t happened yet: “Same god, same language, same culture and history... .” Then, lamenting what he considers the war’s tragic underlying cause, Freemantle concludes, “Different dreams. Different dreams. So very sad. Very sad.” When Freemantle declares his earnest hope for an English-Confederate alliance, Longstreet reminds him that England would never ally itself with a Confederacy that allows slavery. In *The Killer Angels*, Michael Shaara’s Longstreet affirms slavery as the central issue of the war. In *Gettysburg*, Longstreet divorces slavery from the Confederate war effort as he says, “we should have freed the slaves, then fired on Fort Sumter.” He then directs a barb at the Englishman: “I guess we Southerners and you English have one thing in common. We’d rather lose the war than admit to the mistake. We whipped you British twice as I recollect.”<sup>73</sup> The “we” of Longstreet’s gibe implies an essential Americanness underlying the Confederacy. That recurring trope casts the Confederate war for secession not as failure of the Great Experiment, but an admirable defense of the Revolutionary legacy.

While the film advances that shared history, it minimizes the discussion of slavery, as in Tom

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<sup>72</sup> B.J. Small, “Audience Screens Civil War Epic ‘Gettysburg,’” *Gettysburg Times*, July 02, 1993; also quoted in Pierce, “Some Observations About Film ‘Gettysburg.’” The viewer interviewed by the *Gettysburg Times* was Gary Kersey, a member of the Civil War Institute.

<sup>73</sup> “Different Dreams,” in Maxwell, *Gettysburg*.

Chamberlain's conversation with Confederate prisoners of war. Michael Shaara's Tom recounts the conversation to his brother after the colonel's self-revealing encounter with the wounded runaway. The revision of the scene in *Gettysburg* features not merely Tom Chamberlain's second-hand account but the actual conversation. As the change gives increasing voice to a Confederate "cause," the film situates the encounter before the appearance of the presumed slave, who remains mute throughout the scene. While the film forgoes the novel's awkward and condescending miscommunication, the filmmakers choose not to write alternate dialogue but to deprive the man of any voice at all. An unintelligible communication apparently occurs off screen before Chamberlain's arrival, and of that failed attempt, Kilrain asserts that he "can't understand anyone south of Mason-Dixon, rebs or darkeys."<sup>74</sup> While Kilrain's assessment renders the matter in terms of regional otherness, he conflates the accents of rebel soldiers, some of whom are slaveholders, and the people they hold as chattel. Kilrain's statement advances the absurd notion that one regionally-unified voice could serve all parties.

The film also rewrites both the letter and substance of Tom Chamberlain's prisoner dialogue. After a greeting in which each conversant establishes that neither has visited other's home state, Tom inquires the prisoner's reason for fighting. The Confederate soldier deflects the question back to Tom, who responds as though the answer should be apparent: "Well, to free the slaves, of course. Preserve the Union." The Confederate soldier declares, "I don't know about some other folk, but I ain't fighting' for no darkeys one way or the other. I'm fightin' for my rats (rights). All of us here, that's what we're fightin' for." Confusion ensues over "rats" and "rights" but from then on, the film diverges from the original account. In *The Killer Angels*, Tom presses the soldiers to state which of their rights have been infringed. Their denial of slavery as a cause and their inability to identify a specific offense, become the object of derision. The Tom Chamberlain of *Gettysburg* fails to interrogate the claim of offended rights. Instead, the soldier continues, "Why is it you folks just can't live the way you want to live, let us live

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<sup>74</sup> "No Divine Spark" in Maxwell, *Gettysburg*.

the way we do? Live and let live, I hear some folks say. Be a might less fuss and bother if more folks took it to heart.” The soldier reveals his place of capture and continues, “Wasn’t a pretty sight. Many a good boy lost a young and promising life. Some were blue, some were gray. Seen enough of this war?” Tom decides that he has, and in the scene’s rewriting, white soldiers on both sides overcome their regional differences to lament a mutual tragedy. The film discards the mocking tone of the *Angels* passage for one more solemn. In the distance, camp musicians play the dolorous chords of “My Old Kentucky Home.” While it augments the sentimentality of the scene, the musical accompaniment also further complicates the representation of slavery and the rewriting of *The Killer Angels*’ central narrative.<sup>75</sup>

Played in the film by a camp fiddler and guitarist, “My Old Kentucky Home” is a nostalgic tune composed by minstrel songwriter Stephen Foster. The original lyrics, which are not recited in the film, include the same racist language employed by the Tennessee soldier, and subsequently Kilrain. They tell of a place where all is “merry,” “happy,” and “bright” until “By ‘n’ by Hard Times comes a-knocking at the door.” The bucolic scenes of blooming meadows and slave children playing on the cabin floor are replaced by sorrow and separation. The chorus is written in the plural voice of slaves sold south. While their heads “must bow,” and backs will “have to bend” in the sugar cane fields of a subsequent stanza, the chorus tells of sorrow for both the slaves and mistress but prioritizes the slaveholder’s grief: “Weep no more my lady/Oh! weep no more today!/We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home,/For the Old Kentucky Home far away.”<sup>76</sup>

The composition is one of several “carry me back” tunes written by white musicians in the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> “My Old Kentucky Home,” in Ronald Herder, ed., *500 Best-Loved Song Lyrics* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998), 237-237, GoogleBooks, <http://books.google.com/books?id=4xFQAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA236&dq=my+old+kentucky+home+good+night+lyrics&hl=en&sa=X&ei=KcQIVMvoO5CPyATP3YCQBw&ved=0CDcQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=my%20old%20kentucky%20home&f=false>.

1840s and 50s that ventriloquize the voices of slaves longing to return to their former homes after being sold in the domestic trade. According to Stephen Deyle, masters who disrupted lives and dismantled social networks by selling bondspeople downriver, interpreted the songs as evidence of their slaves' continued devotion. Slaveholders convinced themselves that despite the betrayal of selling enslaved men and women away, "their people still loved them and truly wanted to be with them again."<sup>77</sup> By a similar logic, the genre maintained its popularity with the rise of postwar plantation nostalgia and the belief among whites that "life had somehow been better for black people before Emancipation."<sup>78</sup> According to Deyle, slaveholders sang the songs themselves but also reportedly compelled their slaves to sing them. In an irony presumably lost on the filmmakers, the melody that plays to the background of the soldier's blue-gray elegy emblemizes a history of multi-faceted performativity. The final notes play just as the film cuts to the scene of the wounded runaway. His unaccountable voicelessness against the expanded, unscrutinized defense of Confederate rights captures in microcosm the fate of the slavery narrative in *Gettysburg*. As the film relegates slavery to the margins of the war, it disassociates the song's melody from its lyrical content. It becomes the anthem of commonalities between white soldiers who are weary of war and pining for home, whether it is Maine, Tennessee, or Virginia, which Louis Armistead trumpets along with the Revolutionary roots of the Confederate rebellion.

The drama of Armistead's death and his ill-fated friendship with Winfield Hancock are depicted in the text and on film, but *Gettysburg* suggests a Biblical origin for the story of two friends opposing each other in war.<sup>79</sup> Elevated to the status of scripture, the crisis of friendship acquires a religious significance, while Hancock's lament for his old comrade sends a bleary eyed Chamberlain to crouch behind a supply wagon. News of Kilrain's death soon follows, and the viewer sees Chamberlain, on the

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<sup>77</sup> Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 244.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>79</sup> "What do the Books Say?" in Maxwell, *Gettysburg*.

verge of tears for most of the film, finally weeping for his friend.<sup>80</sup> Soon afterward during an artillery bombardment, Chamberlain sees Hancock riding through white smoke. A subordinate played by Ken Burns pleads with the general to dismount, but a defiant Hancock declares, “There are times when a corps commander’s life does not count.”<sup>81</sup> The film cuts to Chamberlain, who appears stupefied by a declaration so at odds to his earlier assertion that “we all have value.” Rather than a means of interrogating the race and class legacies of the founding, Chamberlain’s crisis compounds the story of lost friendship and validates Hancock’s aggrandizement of self-sacrifice.

The film reiterates that message with the expanded role of the actor-turned spy who initially scouts the federal strength and position. Harrison appears once in the novel and recurs only in the film, where Longstreet tolerates him as a necessary annoyance. On the third morning of the battle, a grinning Harrison greets Longstreet and asks for a musket to join what he thinks will be the Confederate victory that ends the war. Amazed at the request and its naiveté, Longstreet predicts each terrible phase of the mile march across the open field. He utters his disaster prophecy, not as an assessment of Lee’s command but simply as a means to deter the unlikely volunteer from an action that will probably result in his death. Once fully advised, a solemn Harrison declares “Sir, with your permission, I’ll get myself that musket, sir.”<sup>82</sup> With apostates of *The Killer Angels* absent from *Gettysburg*, Maxwell makes an eleventh hour convert of Harrison. The comic figure of dubious character, the film suggests, becomes an honorable soldier by virtue of his willingness to sacrifice himself in an assault he knows will fail.

The film trumpets that code again when Armistead rallies reluctant troops who have halted their advance toward certain death. In *The Killer Angels*, Armistead observes dead and dying men, “piles of red meat,” a boy gripping his stomach with “blood pouring out of him like a butchered pig.” Instead of

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<sup>80</sup> “News of Kilrain” in Maxwell, *Gettysburg*.

<sup>81</sup> “Bombardment Begins” in Maxwell, *Gettysburg*; Kimmel, “‘Gettysburg’ Captures History.”

<sup>82</sup> “What’s going to happen” in Maxwell, *Gettysburg*.



anything suggestive of the degradation and dehumanization of war, the film offers a vision of a valorous charge cheered by Pickett yelling, “That’s the style, Lo! That’s the style!”<sup>83</sup> The film’s virtually bloodless depiction of combat and its evasion of the emotional horror were noted by critics as a major flaw of the film.<sup>84</sup> Both Maxwell and Turner defended the decision, saying they did not want to alienate audiences.<sup>85</sup> Asked whether the film’s celebration of nobility, sans carnage, glorified war, Turner insisted it did not. As *Gettysburg* celebrates the very futility *The Killer Angels* condemns, however, the film becomes a story of two almost-brothers separated by war that ends with a promise of reunion. The final scene lingers on Tom and Lawrence Chamberlain locked in fraternal embrace.

### ***The Killer Angels Continued***

Following the release of *Gettysburg*, Michael Shaara’s son, Jeff, made his father’s novel the centerpiece of a trilogy. Jeff Shaara’s novels *Gods and Generals* and *The Last Full Measure* served as a prequel and sequel to *The Killer Angels*. Of the four men who are the focus of *Gods and Generals*, the younger Shaara writes “their stories tell the stories of many others.” They weave together “to shape the most tragic event in our nation’s history, and so” he concludes, “their story is our story.”<sup>86</sup> As he writes of a single story held in common, Jeff Shaara—like his father, Burns, and others—interprets the Civil War through the language of tragedy, the full implications of which are only evident in the conclusion of *The Last Full Measure*. In the professorial mind of Michael Shaara’s Chamberlain, the parlance of

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<sup>83</sup> “Armistead’s Rally” in Maxwell, *Gettysburg*.

<sup>84</sup> See for instance David Baron, “‘Gettysburg’ Has Feel Of War Without Horror,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), October 15, 1993, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>85</sup> Keough, “‘Gettysburg’ Worth the Fight.”

<sup>86</sup> Jeff Shaara, introduction to *Gods and Generals* (1996; repr., New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 4. Hereafter, this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Gods*.

tragedy conveys a late twentieth century concept of trauma, one in which “a sense of space and time suspended” supplants all other emotion (*Killer Angels*, 334). The “tragic” conclusion of *Gods*, however, delivers an excess of emotion and an abundance of tears when Jeff Shaara adopts a sentimental mode for an impromptu ritual of communal mourning. As the author of *Gods* asserts the representativeness of his four main characters—Chamberlain, Hancock, Lee and Jackson—he defines the Civil War and its singular tragedy as the province of white male officers.

If in *Angels*, Lee comes to epitomize the “appalling sick stupidity” of generals who send their men to certain and unnecessary death, Jeff Shaara restores Lee, not quite to his godly incarnation of generations past, but to the status of noble hero venerated as much by the author as by his own men. As the architect of two Union disasters (Fredericksburg in *Gods* and the Petersburg crater in *Measure*), Ambrose Burnside emerges in Jeff Shaara’s fiction as the general most worthy of readers’ contempt. In *Gods*, Winfield Scott Hancock replaces Longstreet as the wise but embittered adjutant who, in a seemingly endless series of Union defeats, is unable to save his subordinates from the imbecility of men who outrank him. Jeff Shaara minimizes the role of Longstreet and thus diminishes the lone critic’s disapproval of Lee. In two novels, Shaara writes exactly one chapter from Longstreet’s perspective, and it concludes with Longstreet being critically wounded.

Where Jeff Shaara matches the faith of Lee against the doubts of Longstreet, the author revives the trope of failed listening from *The Killer Angels*. This time, the motif appears in the literal and figurative deafness of Longstreet, who refused to attend his children’s funeral and hear the comforting words of the minister. Through Lee, Jeff Shaara suggests Longstreet’s withdrawal into “quiet darkness,” where the bereaved father, who also suffers physical hearing loss, rejects the consolation of two paternal figures—God and Lee. Jeff Shaara thus implies that the apostasy Longstreet experiences in *Angels*—his alienation from God and his disaffection with his commander—are Longstreet’s

shortcomings, not the failures of God or General Lee (*Gods*, 318).

Though Lee's command is inextricable from his religious belief, not God but George Washington presides over the opening pages of the novel. As executor to his father-in-law's will, the future Confederate general begins the novel as the reluctant custodian of a presidential shrine, the Washington legacy, and a badly disordered estate. George Washington Parke Custis, a grandson of Martha Washington, designed his mansion as "a place where the name of George Washington would forever be preserved in souvenirs of the first presidency" (*Gods*, 15). Having drafted his will without legal counsel, Custis left a document full of "contradictions" and "grand pronouncements." Later, it is also revealed to include a provision that all his slaves be manumitted within five years of Custis's death. Here, Jeff Shaara, who managed his own father's estate, signals his authorial departure from the legacy of *The Killer Angels*. Unlike his father, the younger Shaara locates no essential flaw in humanity, only in a discrepant document that also stands for the nation's political inheritance. This, Lee is called to save when the current president summons him to quash the raid of Harper's Ferry. Among John Brown's hostages is a grandnephew of George Washington.

Though Lee ultimately opposes the Federal army he once served, the author justifies the new command as an extension of the general's conservatorship. With Lee's disapproval of Deep South "radicals" as well as his identification with Revolutionary founders and General—not President—Washington, Jeff Shaara attempts to draw a fine, if rather absurd, distinction: By accepting command of the Virginia militia and eventually the Confederate army, Lee does not cast his lot with "radicals" but with conservative-minded "revolutionaries" who set out to preserve the legacy of the founding. Part of the same mythology that aggrandized Lee also portrayed him as someone who opposed slavery, but this characterization largely ignores his opinions and actions as a slaveholder. In *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Letters*, Elizabeth Brown Pryor finds that, indeed, Lee "may have hated slavery, but it was not because of any ethical dilemma. What Lee disliked about slavery was

its inefficiency, the messiness of its relationships, the responsibility it entailed, and the taint of it.”

According to Pryor, Lee “resented the fact that slavery had been visited on the South by unwise forefathers,” but he also had no qualms about defending or exercising the prerogatives of a slaveholder.<sup>87</sup> As Prior relates,

In 1856, and as late as July 1860, he expressed a willingness to buy slaves. Those blacks who were in his possession were frequently traded away for his own convenience, regardless of the destruction it caused to the bondsman’s family. He ignores injustice to the slaves and defends the rights of the slaveholder in both his 1841 and 1856 letters to his wife, and he continued to uphold laws that constrained blacks well after the war. During the brief time that Lee had authority over the Arlington slaves, he proved to be an unsympathetic and demanding master. When disagreements over slavery brought about the dissolution of the Union and he was forced to take sides, he chose not just to withdraw from the U.S. Army and quietly retire, as did some of his fellow officers, but to lead an opposing army that without question intended to defend the right to hold human property.<sup>88</sup>

Given Lee’s view of slavery as a troublesome inheritance, Jeff Shaara’s account does appear to contain certain grains of fact, but Shaara constructs his overall narrative around an apologist theme. He not only seeks to absolve Lee for what might otherwise be regarded as an act of treason but also attempts to equate Lee’s actions, however speciously, with the American Revolution. Notably absent from *Gods and Generals* is anything resembling the critique of *The Killer Angels*’ Arthur Freemantle, who considers both slavery and the Civil War evidence that the United States has already abandoned its Revolutionary principles. Jeff Shaara emphasizes the multiple ways white officers on each side regard the Civil War as a defense of the nation’s founding ideals. Washington, far from being the “bloody fool” of Freemantle’s appraisal, enjoys a mythic, almost godlike omnipresence in the early chapters, as *Gods and Generals* attempts to exonerate Lee for his decision to take up arms against the United States.

The first military action of the novel requires the future Confederate commander to restore order against the violence of John Brown. Through the assessments of military officers and a

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<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Letters* (New York: Viking, 2007), 145.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

newspaper reporter, Shaara casts Brown and his co-conspirators alternately as “insurrectionists,” “trouble,” and a “violent man...who will not hesitate to kill himself and everyone around him for his cause” (*Gods*, 43- 45). Brown’s desire for “the slaves to rise up” and his belief that he can “start a revolution” leads J.E.B. Stuart to pronounce him “crazy” (*Gods*, 45). The persona of Brown that emerges in these few brief exchanges is an extremist whose agenda is to be achieved by violent and lawless means. That Brown’s only named prisoner, Lewis Washington, represents himself as an emissary of non-violent resolution, only to be seized and imprisoned, casts Brown’s agenda of emancipation through violent revolution as a veritable hijacking of U.S. laws and political institutions. In Jeff Shaara’s rendering of Harper’s Ferry, Lee is champion of those laws and protector of the people against a dangerous radical. That opposition carries over, or so the author seems to argue, into Lee’s command of the Virginia militia, which begins as the defensive force of a moderate state driven to secession by federal aggression. Jeff Shaara lends no alternative to this view of Brown or to Lee’s dislike of radicals, which most often manifests toward abolitionists and later Radical Republicans.

The likely candidate for contradiction is the voice from *The Killer Angels* most committed to ending slavery, but in the rhetorical reframing, *Gods and Generals* subtracts from Chamberlain’s character the abolitionist sympathies that define his idealism in the early chapters of *Angels*. In a recruiting speech to his students, Jeff Shaara’s Chamberlain espouses Unionist principles more consistent with the historical figure than his fictional counterpart in *Angels*.<sup>89</sup> As Michael Shaara exercised creative license to critique a war of ideals, his Chamberlain wavered between principles of the Republican party and those of Radical Abolitionists, the political party of John Brown. As the younger Shaara condemns radicalism and touts Confederate rebellion as a reenactment of the American Revolution, he forgoes any discussion of Radical Abolitionist ideology other than Brown’s purported

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<sup>89</sup> According to biographer Edward Longacre, the real Chamberlain favored abolition for the tactical advantage he believed it provided the Union military. Edward G. Longacre, *Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain: The Soldier and the Man* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Publishing, 1999), 27.

madness.<sup>90</sup>

The platform of the Radical Abolitionist party called for the immediate eradication of slavery and sanctioned violence as an acceptable means to abolition. Party members, especially Brown, regarded slavery as a state of war, a condition that justified armed assault against slaveholders. Radical Abolitionists also saw themselves as the rightful successors of the nation's founders, who, they felt certain, never intended to declare the equal creation of all men and then allow millions of people to remain in bondage. Radical Abolitionists interpreted the Constitution as an anti-slavery document. Contrary to Shaara's portrayal of them as lawless extremists, Radical Abolitionists acted according to what they believed to be the true aims of the founders.<sup>91</sup>

Jeff Shaara refers to abolitionists as "radical," with a usage and syntax that suggests all abolitionists as dangerous agitators. Abolitionists of all stripes are lumped together with a connotation analogous to the descriptors the novel applies to John Brown—not just "trouble," not merely "crazy" but a "violent man...who will not hesitate to kill himself and everyone around him for his cause." Amid rhetoric that casts Lee and his cabal in the image of the Revolutionary founders, Jeff Shaara redirects his father's characterization of Lee to a monomaniacal incarnation of Brown, who alone acts on behalf of emancipation. In Lee's and possibly even the author's view, not slavery but agitating to end slavery threatens the safety and integrity of the republic.

*Gods and Generals* renders its most extended consideration of slavery from the perspective of Lee. Nate Cole, manumitted upon Custis's death, returns with an offer to purchase his brother's freedom and to urge the fulfillment of the freedom provision of Custis's will. His arrival is announced

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<sup>90</sup> John Brown had a reputation for being "mad," but the term was a pejorative often applied to ardent reformers, as when William Lloyd Garrison pronounced Radical Abolitionists "madmen." As John Stauffer explains, "In this society, the boundaries separating madness from sanity depended more on ideological than psychological distinctions." John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (2001; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 43.

<sup>91</sup> Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, 22- 23, 27.

by the bondswoman Rebecca, to whom Lee's son refers by an appellation of fictive kinship, "Aunt Becky" (*Gods*, 70). Now "frail and half blind," Rebecca is a familiar figure from plantation literature, the stereotypical devoted "servant" (Lee rarely uses the words slave). Lee recalls Cole's brother as the man whose foot was amputated in a farm accident years ago and who "hobbled about with a cane" and "did odd work for the other field hands...that didn't require much mobility" (*Gods*, 73). To Nate Cole, now a blacksmith on a Pennsylvania farm, Lee explains that the slaves who remain "are not for sale," but any who want to leave may do so. The problem, says Lee, is that as a fit worker who became self-supporting, Nate Cole was an exception among the slave population of Arlington. With no acknowledgment that bodily infirmities were likely the physical result of lifetimes laboring in bondage, Lee explains "Men like Bo, and the women like Rebecca," presumed to be representative of the thirty or so slaves who remain, "don't have much hope of finding any work" (*Gods*, 73). The fact that field hands continue to work on the property contradicts Lee's explanation for their continued enslavement. Cole's assurance that his brother need not work because "I can take care of him now" upholds Lee's paternalism. As the only model of master-slave relations in the novel, that paternalism, coupled with Lee's refusal to commodify the family's slaves, renders a delusive portrait of slavery as an innocuous condition unwittingly inherited and reluctantly perpetuated by beneficent masters.

Though Lee's position obscures economic exploitation by a system that reduced men, women, and children to chattel property, Cole's pressing inquiries do reveal underlying economic factors. Though he was initially relieved at the will's freedom provision, Lee claims that the bondspeople have no desire to leave once manumitted and that the estate's financial insolvency will not allow him to hire freedpeople as paid laborers. Alternately, Lee assumes the slaves have little knowledge of the world beyond Arlington and says he cannot merely send them away. Cole says he knows that some have heard of Liberia and wish to go there. According to Jeff Shaara's Lee, Liberia is a "good solution," but he again asserts the impossibility of financing the passage (*Gods*, 74). Demonstrating his willingness to

grant freedom in the right circumstance and situating the freedom provision as one of multiple dilemmas bequeathed by a dead patriarch, the novel essentially exculpates Lee for his failure to manumit Arlington's thirty slaves. The novel also suggests the same problems, attributable to the same origins, for the slaveholding republic represented by the Washington-Custis-Lee family. The arguments of national scale are similarly based on a dubious ideology of paternalism. Proposed by the only African American voice in the novel and endorsed by the representative slaveholder, colonization is the only course sanctioned as a "good solution." The benevolent paternalism of Lee and the advocacy for colonization are allowed to stand as the novel's representative model of racial politics.

In reality, the will of George Washington Parke Custis did call for the manumission of Arlington's slaves, and like his fictional counterpart in *Gods and Generals*, Robert E. Lee delayed his execution of the freedom directive. While Jeff Shaara offers a paternalist defense of slavery and of Lee, historically, Lee's failure to manumit Arlington's bondspeople fostered discontent and resistance among a population who considered themselves rightfully free. According to Elizabeth Brown Pryor, the will directed that debts and bequests be paid first and that the slaves be manumitted within five years. As Pryor writes, the will "called for land to be sold to pay the debts and legacies, and never states that these obligations should take precedence over freeing the slaves."<sup>92</sup> As executor, Lee had trouble reconciling the will's seemingly contradictory provisions and doubted that he would be able to manumit the slaves in five years' time.<sup>93</sup> In addition, the custom of the Washington and Custis families had been to respect slave families and leave them intact, but as manager of Arlington, Lee frequently hired out slaves, and, according to Pryor, "By 1860, he had broken up every family but one on the estate, some of whom had been together since Mount Vernon days."<sup>94</sup> Once the manumission provision

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<sup>92</sup> Pryor, *Reading the Man*, 261, 265-265.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.



of the will became known, the people Lee continued to hold in bondage and whose family ties he suddenly disrupted resisted Lee's authority and insisted on their freedom. Pryor chronicles two instances in which rebellions were averted—in one case, Lee “physically overpowered” three bondsmen who claimed to be as free as he was.<sup>95</sup> In another case, three slaves ran away because, in the words of one, Wesley Norris, “we considered ourselves free.”<sup>96</sup> After they were apprehended and returned to Lee's custody, according to Norris's account, Lee ordered that the three be lashed and their backs washed with brine.<sup>97</sup> In 1862, a court ruling finally determined that the Custis slaves should be freed, regardless of whether the other debts and legacies had been paid. As the will had also directed, the court ordered that land should be sold to satisfy those liabilities against the estate.<sup>98</sup> In her assessment of his time as master, Pryor writes of Lee, “He never recognized the slaves' fundamental desire to change their condition; instead he tried to superimpose his sense of ‘duty’ upon them. Moreover, by breaking up families and proposing to ship them far away from their community, he both denied the slaves humanity and stepped beyond the genteel code of paternalism that even proslavery men professed.”<sup>99</sup> In stark contrast to the paternalism Jeff Shaara espouses in *Gods and Generals*, Lee's management of Arlington, in reality, exposed slavery's inherent violence and bondspeople's desire to claim and assert the freedom they believed was already theirs.

Later, as Jeff Shaara's Chamberlain leads his first engagement at Fredericksburg, a man ahead of him breaks from the line, turns and runs against the advancing troops. In an act seemingly

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 266-267.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 260, 267.

<sup>97</sup> Wesley Norris interview in “Robert E. Lee: His Brutality to his Slaves,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 14, 1866, reprinted in Pryor, *Reading the Man*, 260-261.

<sup>98</sup> Pryor, *Reading the Man*, 274.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 275.

inconsistent with his appeal to the mutineers at Gettysburg, Chamberlain draws his pistol and points it at the head of the soldier, who reverses course (*Gods*, 342). Worrying that he too will submit to an instinct of self-preservation, Chamberlain tries to focus on “the *cause*,” which he now defines as “slavery...the rights of all men,” but his strategy does not work because “out in front of him the puffs of smoke and the small flashes were all that was real” (*Gods*, 342). In a revision of his recruiting speech and in an articulation more akin—albeit much briefer—to his ideology of *The Killer Angels*, Chamberlain casts “slavery, the rights of all men” as his reason for fighting. In *The Killer Angels*, the discovery of his own racialism prompts Chamberlain to question the righteousness of his killing slaveholders to fulfill his vision of the founding. In *Gods and Generals*, where such a radical stance would be likened to the actions of John Brown, Chamberlain’s estimation of slavery is briefly and incompletely articulated. The hasty dismissal of Chamberlain’s cause signals a narrative in which the experience of combat overwhelms the narrative of slavery and emancipation.

At Fredericksburg, Jeff Shaara reprises the language of tragedy, which for Chamberlain lies in the “raw stupidity” of Burnside’s command and the unspeakable “waste” that leaves the series’ most prolific orator at a loss for words. As the armies position themselves for the coming battle, the residents of Fredericksburg, “all part of the same tragedy,” Jeff Shaara notes, flee their homes to escape a destruction that only occurs after battle, when a retreating Federal army unleashes its collective anger and vandalizes the town (*Gods*, 302). In terms of literary genre, however, the ultimate tragedy of *Gods and Generals* happens in the change of circumstances for the Confederate army, which Shaara attributes to the death of Stonewall Jackson.

*Gods and Generals* positions Jackson as a counterpart to Longstreet. Both men enter the narrative with the experience of what might be deemed personal tragedy. The death of Longstreet’s children, Jeff Shaara suggests, led the grieving father to turn away from God; but the loss of two babies and his first wife, Ellie, have the opposite effect on Jackson. The deaths, writes Jeff Shaara, “place him

more fervently than ever into the hands of his God” and prompts Jackson to regard “every aspect of his life, every act as only a part of his duty to please God” (*Gods*, 6). Where Jackson’s personal faith initially replaces his military duty, his service to the Confederate army becomes an extension of his service to God. His duty as a soldier is inextricable from his religious devotion. Unlike Longstreet, whom he deems more cautious, Lee understands that “if left alone, Jackson held nothing back, would operate with a fury and an anger that was simple and straightforward.” As a soldier, Lee regards Jackson as “a very strong and dangerous animal that would do whatever you asked him to do with complete dedication and frightening efficiency” (*Gods*, 227). In that respect, Jackson most completely embodies the “The Soldier’s Faith.” He also notably conflates his military and religious duties.

Lee also observes that in his presence Jackson was “like a young child, eyes wide, eager to please the fatherly Lee” (*Gods*, 227). The novel develops that quality in Jackson’s unlikely friendship with five-year-old Jane Corbin. His interactions with the child astonish Jackson’s aides, who cannot reconcile the general’s rollicking playfulness with his ferocity on the battlefield. Jackson explains his fondness for Jane as both a diversion from the war and access to the divine: “How easy it is to forget... all that we must do... all the horrors that we have seen... simply by staring into the face of a small child. There is Providence here... in that. The children are blessed” (*Gods*, 381). When the departing general goes to say his goodbyes, he finds that Jane and all the other children of the house have fallen ill with scarlet fever. The report of Jane’s death drives Jackson to a field beyond his encampment, where he seats himself on a stump and sobs. Just as the childlike frolic astonishes his subordinates, the general’s grief likewise presents a curiosity. In words that echo Lee’s philosophy of *The Killer Angels*, one officer affirms, “A general cannot cry for his men. They cannot even cry for each other now. This army has cried all its tears” (*Gods*, 383).

Jackson’s recognition of a divine quality in Jane followed almost immediately by her death evokes the failure of the soldier’s escapism, along with a convention of nineteenth century sentimental

novels—the death of a character, usually a female child, who is too pure to inhabit this world. Classic examples of this figure include Beth March of *Little Women*, Daisy of *Ruth Hall*, and Eva St. Claire of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The death of providential little Jane foregrounds the sentimental undercurrents of Jeff Shaara's "tragedy" and prefigures the demise of Jackson. The general suffers a gunshot wound from friendly fire and survives the amputation of his left arm with "absolute faith" in the skill of the doctor (*Gods*, 445). But a cough that plagues Jackson on the eve of Chancellorsville advances fatally into full-blown pneumonia. As the general absolves the men of the North Carolina unit who shot him, his next to last words are an espousal of Christian forgiveness and a laudation of soldierly duty. In Jackson, Jeff Shaara creates a sentimental martyr, replete with a scene of deathbed evangelism that simultaneously casts him as the fullest embodiment of "The Soldier's Faith" and, in a strange inversion of Stowe's anti-slavery narrative, as the Confederate army's equivalent of Little Eva.

In the corresponding event of *The Killer Angels*, Kilrain's death drives Chamberlain to abandon his belief in Heaven and the dignity of man. With Jackson's death in *Gods and Generals*, Lee's "unquestioning" faith gives way to a fleeting consideration of doubt but is ultimately upheld (*Gods*, 485). As he conjures the mental image of Jackson, Lee buries his face in his hands and cries (*Gods*, 485). Elsewhere, news of Jackson's death prompts the "low and heavy sounds" of his men weeping. As Lee cries for his lost adjutant, he defies the rule that a general cannot weep for his own men and does so in tandem with an army that has not cried all of its tears, after all. Together, the men participate in a collective mourning for their model of soldierly virtue.

While Lee overcomes a less than dire test of his faith, *Gods* also departs from *Angels* in accessing Jackson's death dream. In the dream, Jackson's mother, whom he earlier casts as a divine intercessor, leads him toward a river crossing and a place without pain or sickness. Both as a contrast to the "metallic death" Chamberlain imagines in *The Killer Angels* and to the real river crossing that leads soldiers to a metallic death at Fredericksburg, Jeff Shaara assures his readers of serenity and afterlife.

At the same time he offers catharsis in the collective grief of soldiers who “through their tears” raise their voices in “one high chorus—the rebel yell” (*Gods*, 485). Converting the battle cry to a mourning ritual, Jeff Shaara suggests a change of fortune that he reiterates in his afterward. His epigraph is the benediction from the 1881 unveiling of the Jackson monument in New Orleans: “And thou knowest O Lord that when though dist decide that the Confederacy should not succeed, though hadst first to remove thy servant Stonewall Jackson” (*Gods*, 481). The first installment of Jeff Shaara’s “tragedy” ends with an elegy to Jackson and the Lost Cause.

In his review of the 2003 film adaptation, historian Steven Woodworth called *Gods and Generals* “the most pro-Confederate film since *Birth of a Nation*.” The film and its makers, Woodworth charged, had “[brought] to the big screen the major themes of Lost Cause mythology that professional historians have been working for half a century to combat.”<sup>100</sup> Maxwell’s film elevates Jackson—played by the same actor who portrayed Pickett in *Gettysburg*—to the central figure of the film. The introduction of two African American characters who do not appear in the Jeff Shaara’s novel does nothing to mitigate the film’s Lost Cause themes. When her owners evacuate before the battle of Fredericksburg, the bondswoman Martha stays to protect their house from Union troops. Later, when the Union army requisitions the house for use as a hospital, Martha tells Hancock of her desire to be free and for her children to be free. This longing apparently trumps the love she says she feels for her enslavers and her estimation of them as “good people,” but even Martha’s self-assertion is scripted in such a way that it reinforces a view of slavery as an institution of kind masters and loyal slaves.<sup>101</sup> Her statements imply that Martha understands her freedom and her children’s freedom to be connected to the Union cause, but an earlier conversation between Jackson and an attendant dismisses any

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<sup>100</sup> Steven E. Woodworth, review of *Gods and Generals*, *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 3 (December 2003): 1123.

<sup>101</sup> “Wanting to Die Free,” *Gods and Generals*, dir., Ron Maxwell (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2003), DVD.

connection between the Confederate cause and slavery. The film does not clarify Jim Lewis's legal status or explain how he came to serve Jackson, though one scene shows Lewis feeding Jackson's horse. In response to a question from the general, Lewis explains that about half of his family are free and the other half are slaves. As the two men pray together, Lewis asks God to let him know, "How is it a good Christian man, like some folks I know, can tolerate their black brothers in bondage? How is it, Lord, they don't just break them chains?" Jackson explains that some officers believe slaves should be enlisted in the army as a condition of freedom. He assures Jim Lewis, "Your people will be free one way or t'other. The only question is whether the Southern government will have the good sense to do it first and soon and in so doing seal a bond of enduring friendship between us."<sup>102</sup> The exchange denies that the Confederate cause is a defense of slavery. In a film that runs more than three-and-a-half hours, the freedom aspirations of the enslaved are relegated to two short sequences. One professes amicable relations between masters and slaves. The other implies that Confederate victory is no obstacle to slave emancipation.

*The Last Full Measure* resumes the narrative with the Confederate withdrawal from Gettysburg. Jeff Shaara's introduction reveals his own dislike of radicalism previously only ventriloquized through Lee. The author favors a "great middle ground" over the pacifists who support a peace concession and "radical abolitionists," who, according to Shaara, "demand the South be brought down entirely, punished for its way of life, its culture, and that anyone who supports the southern cause should be purged from the land." Even as he tries to marginalize his discussion of slavery, the author's euphemisms—"the South", its "way of life," "its culture," and the "southern cause"—inadvertently locate slavery at the center of Southern identity and politics. His indignation against Confederate retribution, coupled with the earlier endorsement of colonization, portends his vision of postwar racial

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<sup>102</sup> "Open Hearts," Maxwell, *Gods and Generals*.

politics.<sup>103</sup>

To his lexicon of “tragedy,” the author of *The Last Full Measure* adds a language of horror. This, he couples with the reemergence of soldiers’ collective anger in what he terms “the beast.” In *Gods and Generals*, “the beast” rears itself as the culmination of two years of incompetent generalship when retreating Union troops ransack Fredericksburg. In *Measure*, this collective wrath turns from possessions to soldiers and no longer stems merely from frustration over bad leadership. In Jeff Shaara’s novels, “the beast” is an ungodly product of war, but the author is not particularly concerned with the nature of humankind. The younger Shaara focuses on the extremes of violence that occur in war, and he conjures “the beast” as the personification of that horror.

In *The Last Full Measure*, Jeff Shaara also employs the trope of the wound as a symbol of national division. In *The Killer Angels*, Kilrain poses a hypothetical—what would happen if the Federal army loses the war; would the country ever reunite? Chamberlain’s replies, “Doubt it. Wound is too deep” (*Angels* 175). In *The Killer Angels*, the wound is shorthand for an irreparable fissure between hostile nations. In *The Last Full Measure*, wounds function on multiple levels. In the hospital, where Chamberlain recuperates from his own injuries, the colonel suggests that his fellow patients will “take the war back home.” The permanent consequences of their wounds—amputated limbs, facial disfigurements—will signify to civilians the unspeakable “horror” of the war, which is otherwise communicated through soldier’s silence or inarticulate screams (*Measure*, 289). Jeff Shaara’s Chamberlain is concerned primarily with physical wounds as he contemplates the prisoners of Andersonville and concludes that they are unlike the wounded from the hospital who “will go home broken, leaving something behind” (*Measure*, 402).

With narrative doubles Longstreet and Hancock, Jeff Shaara correlates dissent with the trope of

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<sup>103</sup> Jeff Shaara, *The Last Full Measure* (1998; repr., New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 1. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Measure*.

new injuries and wounds that are slow to heal. As Shaara establishes in *Gods*, Longstreet returned from the Mexican War with “a wound that hadn’t healed for a long time” (*Gods* 226). In the only one of Jeff Shaara’s chapters told from his perspective, Longstreet meditates on the outcome of Gettysburg only to be shot in a cliffhanger ending that leaves his survival in doubt. Longstreet reflects that Pickett had become “an angry, bitter man, who blamed Lee” for the loss of Pickett’s division. And “somewhere inside himself,” Longstreet acknowledges, “there was a small angry voice that told him Pickett was right” (*Measure*, 147). The conclusion of his chapter in *Measure* finds Longstreet struggling for breath and choking on his own blood, as though the narrative seeks to punish him for his dissidence.

In Hancock’s revisitation of the Chancellor property a year after the battle, the author collapses the memory of Hooker defeating his own army—a memory Hancock “carried into every fight”—with the “horror” of unburied bones and a wound that still pained Hancock nearly every day. As Hancock returns to the old site of command failure, the narrative conflates the persistent memory of Chancellorsville with the festering physical wounds of Gettysburg.<sup>104</sup> Nearly six weeks later, Grant receives a report that Hancock has been replaced temporarily as commander of the Second Corps. His doctors forbid him to ride as “The Gettysburg wounds have opened up” (*Measure*, 279). Meade continues, “Hancock’s still pretty mad at Baldy Smith” over failures at Petersburg (*Measure*, 279). By November, the wound has “opened up again,” causing Hancock to give up his field command for good (*Measure*, 326). “What had plagued Hancock since Gettysburg,” Jeff Shaara explains, was “the daily grief of a painful wound” (*Measure*, 326). Much as with Longstreet, who returns to duty despite unhealed wounds and a paralyzed right arm, the narrative associates Hancock’s physical injuries with his emotional grief and hostility for the fatal incompetence of other generals. Their festering and persistent wounds recall the eighth circle of Dante’s *Inferno*, where “sowers of scandal and of schism,”

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<sup>104</sup> In *Gods and Generals*, Hancock revisits the site where he urged Burnside to ford the river.



suffer wounds that open and close.<sup>105</sup> Not coincidentally, both Hancock and Longstreet drop out of the narrative before Lee's surrender, allowing a reunion free of discord.

In *Gods and Generals*, Jeff Shaara identifies Hancock as one of the novel's four representative characters, but in *Measure*, Shaara excludes Hancock from the trio said to "stand apart because each in his own way, rose to a higher level, not just as a war hero, but as a man of character and dignity and honor" (*Measure*, vii). "To some these characteristics seem quaint and out of date," the younger Shaara tells his reader. "To many others they are qualities that our modern world is sorely missing" (*Measure*, vii). Lee's determination to sacrifice his own army is not grounds for demotion by Jeff Shaara, who evidently subscribes more to Lee's value system than to the one his father establishes in *The Killer Angels*. For casting Grant and Chamberlain as men of dignity and honor, Jeff Shaara's main criterion seems to be the Union officers' willingness to respect those same qualities in the defeated Confederates.

As viewers of *The Civil War* may recall, internal injuries continued to plague the real Chamberlain fifty years after the war. The fictional Chamberlain of *Measure* has a delayed recovery, but his injuries eventually do heal. For Chamberlain, Jeff Shaara reports no such chronic pain as Hancock suffers. At Appomattox, Grant makes generous terms with Lee and forbids his army to celebrate the victory. Chamberlain's order to carry arms—a salute to the Confederates surrendering theirs—somehow mystically reunites the two armies, at least according to the author, who trumpets fraternal reconciliation through the victors' magnanimity (*Measure*, 510).

Until he abandons his faith, the fictional Chamberlain of *The Killer Angels* is determined to eradicate slavery, which he understands as a fundamental contradiction to his ideal of an America that respects the dignity of man. In *The Last Full Measure*, Chamberlain—and Jeff Shaara through him—

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<sup>105</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, Barnes & Noble Classics edition with introduction and notes by Peter Bondanella, trans., Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2003), XXVII.35-42. References are to Canto and Line.

demonstrates more concern for the dignity of the defeated Confederates than for the African American soldiers who make but two brief appearances in the novel. To discuss the second occurrence first, late in the novel Chamberlain observes the engagement of African American troops and wonders “what is this like for them?...What are they feeling? My god... this is what we are fighting for... at least, it is what I am fighting for. And I can never know... I will never feel what this means to them” (*Measure*, 486). That failure of imagination belongs as much to the author as it does to Chamberlain.

Even the military service of black soldiers is only acknowledged surreptitiously. During a presidential revue, Shaara introduces the troops as a camp of men who, like so many others, had volunteered. “But there was a difference,” he tells his readers; that “difference” becomes the overriding characterization of African American soldiers whom the chapter renders anonymous and indistinguishable as a “sea of black faces” (*Measure*, 285). The materialization of the regiment without any discussion of the events leading to African American enlistment or the citizenship implications of their military service anticipates Jeff Shaara’s account of the Battle of the Crater and the novel’s conclusion.

Ambrose Burnside, formerly the commander of the Union army at Fredericksburg, conceives a plan to tunnel under the Confederate army and infiltrate its lines with a surprise massive explosion. A division of African American troops trains for months to lead the assault, but since they have no combat experience, Meade decides at the last minute that they will bring up the rear. Throughout the battle, the commander of the replacement corps lies drunk in his tent and neglects to order his troops to march around the crater. The first wave of soldiers descend directly into the pit and become trapped under the troops who follow them (*Measure*, 311-312). Some of the Confederates accept the surrender of white Union soldiers—the enemy they deem to be like themselves—until the arrival of the last division confronts the Confederates with the willingness of their white adversaries to fight beside black troops. In recognition of what is to them a “shocking reality,” the Confederates stop taking prisoners and kill

any black troops who try to surrender (*Measure*, 311). Whether from retribution or self-preservation, the white federals likewise participate in the murder of African American Union troops.

Witnesses on both sides “[stare] in utter horror” as the “mindless insanity of the beast” possesses their fellow soldiers. In Jeff Shaara’s rendering, the ultimate horror of the crater is the abandonment of rules of war that represent, however paradoxically, the “last fragile string of human decency” (*Measure*, 312). In Shaara’s *Measure*, the soldiers’ racism effects the horror, which in turn subsumes the novel’s consideration of race. The crater becomes another story about the extremes of war and the extremes of inhuman behavior in war. As Shaara relates the story, not only the actions of white troops, but the language of the novel seems to uphold the white soldiers’ racism. In Shaara’s construction of “blue soldiers” and “gray soldiers,” their identification by uniform color implies an underlying similarity that does not carry over to black Union soldiers.

In the closest the novel comes to considering the citizenship implications of African American military service, the author allows a vague commentary on racial inequality to indict the worst of the series’ bad generals. “If the Negroes were angry at not leading the assault,” writes Jeff Shaara, “they could not complain about being left out entirely. Burnside had sent them in anyway, when it was already clear that the plan had failed...If they had missed their opportunity to lead the way, they had not missed their opportunity to die” (*Measure*, 314). Chamberlain’s subsequent failure of imagination as he glimpses black troops on the battlefield suggests a refusal to consider emancipation in the meaning or the outcome of the war. Such an acknowledgment would subvert the author’s interpretation of tragedy, with emphasis on Confederate defeat.

Like the conversation with Nate Cole in *Gods and Generals*, Jeff Shaara narrates the Battle of the Crater in a chapter dedicated to Lee. Shaara orients the racial politics of his novels toward the perspective of the Confederate general. If the reader, any more than Chamberlain, can claim knowledge of a black soldier’s thoughts, emotions, and personal causes, it is not because the author makes any

legible attempt to represent that experience in the series. Though Michael Shaara committed much the same omission in *The Killer Angels*, he also probed and condemned the contradictions between the U.S. founding and the country's reversion to a race-based class hierarchy. The younger Shaara reserves his censure for bad generals of the Federal army and political radicals who—though the author does not say so explicitly—were most committed to racial equality. Jeff Shaara also expresses this condemnation in the language of wounds.

As individual soldiers endure injuries that chronically recur or require a lengthy recovery, the words of Lincoln and Lee elevate the “wound” to a language of collective national trauma. Echoing the prediction of *The Killer Angels*, Jeff Shaara's Lincoln prophesies “This country will never recover from this war, there will always be wounds” (*Measure*, 350). Meanwhile, Jeff Shaara's Lee, similarly expresses his desire for “healing” and for a peaceful reunification (*Measure*, 513).

The murder of Lincoln destroys that vision of an amicable future. Extending his earlier condemnation of extremist behavior and extralegal violence, Jeff Shaara denounces the assassination as the “mindless actions” of “one fanatic.” At one point, paraphrasing Lincoln's Second Inaugural, Jeff Shaara writes, “the death of Lincoln ripped apart the nascent healing of a battered nation struggling to put the deep and bloody wounds behind it.” Shaara rails against “powerful men in powerful positions” who, he claims, would “point their fingers into the heart of what had been the Confederacy, using the emotion and the sorrow of a nation to punish those who could too easily be blamed” (*Measure*, 521-522). While Jeff Shaara apparently advocates a national future without blame for the war, his novel is not without villains. The “powerful” and purportedly “self-serving” Congressmen, who go unnamed, can be mistaken for no one but the Radical Republicans. Shaara's disdain for radicalism—which he manages to temper for secessionists who “fought for honor and a cause”—culminates in a thinly-veiled attack on Radical Republicans, whose rise to power constitutes for Jeff Shaara the “last casualty of the war,” which he defines as the death of “Lincoln's optimism” and his “belief in a future made glorious

by the rights of the individual” (*Measure*, 521).

In *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, Gary Wills interprets the Gettysburg Address as an implicit anti-slavery document and shows how Lincoln, without ever mentioning slavery, reinterprets the Constitution via the Declaration of Independence.<sup>106</sup> Wills reads Lincoln’s oratory as a national re-founding that no longer sanctions the sin of slavery. Jeff Shaara apparently ignores both this aspect of Lincoln’s speech and the Radical Republicans’ commitment to African American civil rights. He argues instead that their policy of Reconstruction would take away “what had not been taken away from the southern people by the great crushing weight of war” (*Measure*, 522). Jeff Shaara invokes a Southern identity defined implicitly in terms of whiteness and defeat.<sup>107</sup>

Even if Jeff Shaara failed to recognize the tacit references to emancipation in the “Gettysburg Address,” the novelist conveniently plucks Lincoln’s call for magnanimity from the Second Inaugural but ignores the bulk of the speech in which Lincoln casts the war as a divine punishment for the national sin of slavery. By Lincoln’s pen, the Civil War was a “mighty scourge”—either a punishment administered by the lash or the lash itself. The wounds of Lincoln’s second inaugural are those applied in expropriation of the slave’s labor and those administered by God to purge the country of that national sin.<sup>108</sup>

Jeff Shaara remains silent on the implications for African American citizenship, but in full articulation of his vision of tragedy, the author writes of Reconstruction:

Now would come the angry times, a new brutality; not the guns and the blood of war, but something subtle, quiet and powerful. What had not been taken away from the southern people by the great crushing weight of the war would now be taken by a new kind of violence, a policy of reconstruction that would do everything Lincoln would not. The wounds would not be allowed to heal, the vision of the bright future would be pushed aside, replaced by a dark vision

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<sup>106</sup> Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 38.

<sup>107</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage identifies a similar phenomenon in the cultural memory of white Southerners. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>108</sup> White, *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech*, 154-155, 157.

of revenge. Instead of healing, the wounds would be probed and ripped, would become scars that would never quite close, would be kept alive with anger and hostility for generations (*Measure*, 522).

If not for the second sentence, readers might mistake this as a commentary on the fate of the country's attempts to achieve racial justice after the war. Instead, in Jeff Shaara's version, a "southern people" implicitly defined in terms of whiteness, are victims of an unjust power wielded by a radical faction of the federal government. He ignores the terrorist violence perpetrated by white supremacists against the free black citizenry, though it constitutes just the sort of extremism and extralegal violence Jeff Shaara elsewhere condemns. The tragedy Jeff Shaara laments throughout his narrative is in reality a perfidious cry of Confederate victimhood that the author locates in the country's efforts toward racial equality.

Twenty years later, when a terminally-ill Grant races to finish his memoirs, Shaara writes of that period, "The wounds were healing and the uniform did not matter now. All the old soldiers had a common bond, having been through the great horror" (*Measure*, 540). The healing of wounds and the strength of the reunified nation, which Shaara finds characteristic of the year Grant completed his memoirs (1885) occurred after Reconstruction was hijacked by terrorist violence. Though not the chattel bondage of former years, this epoch constituted a different failure to realize the principles of the founding. That same year, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. delivered his Memorial Day address at Harvard. "The Soldier's Faith" espoused values that Michael Shaara deliberately undermined in *The Killer Angels*. In the so-called sequels to his father's novel, Jeff Shaara repeatedly dismisses slavery and laments the tragedy of sectional antipathy, a wound that finally begins to heal, according to the author's calculations, when the federal government abandons its defense of African American civil rights. In justifying his selection of protagonists, Jeff Shaara appreciates men like Holmes who acknowledge the dignity of their military adversaries but offers one key difference: What reunites the veterans of *The Last Full Measure* is not only mutual valor but also shared horror.

## Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*

In the summer of 1998, *The Last Full Measure* spent seven weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list and occasionally occupied consecutive slots with Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*.<sup>109</sup> By the time Jeff Shaara's novel appeared, *Cold Mountain* had won the National Book Award and spent almost a year as a bestseller. Including a brief return that coincided with the 2003 film adaptation, *Cold Mountain* attracted droves of book buyers for a total of ninety-four weeks—sixty-one in hardcover and thirty-three in paperback.<sup>110</sup> Though the novel received plenty of media coverage, most of the national press began to pay attention to *Cold Mountain* only after it became a bestseller. The publisher's initial marketing campaign directed advance copies to regional media and booksellers in the Southeast; they recommended *Cold Mountain* to readers, who in turn raved about the book to their friends.<sup>111</sup>

That *Cold Mountain* owes its initial success to readers' word of mouth befits a novel inspired by a family's oral history.<sup>112</sup> From his father, Frazier heard the story of a great-great uncle who deserted the Confederate army, walked home to the woman he loved, and died in a gunfight with the Home Guard.<sup>113</sup> With those sketchy details as the sum of the man's known biography, Frazier conceived his novel around his distant relative's long trek home toward the end of the war. The North Carolina-born

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<sup>109</sup> See for instance "Best Sellers," *New York Times*, June 28, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/28/books/best-sellers-june-28-1998.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar> ; "Best Sellers," *New York Times*, July 5, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/05/books/best-sellers-july-5-1998.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar> ; "Best Sellers," *New York Times*, August 2, 1998 <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/02/books/best-sellers-august-2-1998.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar>.

<sup>110</sup> Motoko Rich, "Random House Confident of Follow-Up to 'Cold Mountain,'" *The New York Times*, April 20, 2006, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>111</sup> David Streitfeld, "On a Peak and Still Climbing; The Tale of a Disillusioned Confederate Soldier has Brought Charles Frazier Unexpected Success, but the 'Cold Mountain' Author Still has His Feet Firmly Planted in the South," *The Washington Post*, November 17, 1997, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>112</sup> Mel Gussow, "A Civil War Deserter Reaches no. 1; How a Family Tale Became a Word-of-Mouth Phenomenon," *The New York Times*, August 27, 1997, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>113</sup> Curtis Wilkie, "Charles Frazier's Confederate Odyssey; Former Prof Spent Years Turning His Family's Civil War Story Into Bestseller," *Boston Globe*, October 29, 1997, LexisNexis Academic.

author, initially wanted to tell a story that celebrated the mountain culture and “old lifeways” he recalled in people of his grandparents’ generation. When he heard the story of the real W.P. Inman, Frazier later wrote, it seemed to “offer itself as a form of elegy for that lost world I had been thinking about.”<sup>114</sup>

Reprising the Homeric analogy of years past, Frazier said he conceived *Cold Mountain* not as an *Iliad*, but an *Odyssey*. Whether or not Frazier had *The Killer Angels* in mind as the American *Iliad*, reviewers understandably compared *Cold Mountain* to the novel that had lately commanded the Civil War landscape.<sup>115</sup> Frazier, who holds a Ph.D. in English, professed an admiration for the work of Cormac McCarthy and Gabriel Garcia Marquez but made no claims that Michael Shaara’s novel was part of the literary lineage of *Cold Mountain*. Yet like Shaara, Frazier once taught early American literature and makes that tradition central to his novel.<sup>116</sup> *The Killer Angels* may not have directly inspired Frazier’s novel, but *Cold Mountain* picks up where Shaara’s meditation on faith and American identity leaves off.

Frazier’s novel also reframes the discussion of tragedy. “When you grow up in the South,” Frazier once told a *New York Times* reporter, “you get this concept of the war as this noble, tragic thing, and when I think about my own family’s experience, it doesn’t seem so noble in any direction. To go off and fight for a cause they had not much relation to: that’s the part I see as tragic.”<sup>117</sup> In *Cold Mountain*, Frazier associates the view of tragic Southern nobility with the wealthy widow Mrs. McKennett, whose comfort, decadence, and self-delusion insulate her from the reality inhabited by

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<sup>114</sup> Charles Frazier “Cold Mountain Diary,” *Salon*, July 9, 1997.

<sup>115</sup> See for instance, David Streitfeld, ‘Frazier vs. DeLillo In Title Fight; Historical Epics Are Among Top Fiction Nominees For National Book Award,’ *Washington Post*, October 16, 1997, LexisNexis Academic; George F. Will, “The Book Network,” *Washington Post*, August 31, 1997, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>116</sup> Gussow, “A Civil War Deserter Reaches no. 1; How a Family Tale Became a Word-of-Mouth Phenomenon.”

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*



other characters. The novel sustains the appraisal of war advanced by Ada Monroe: “brutal and benighted on both sides. Degrading to all.”<sup>118</sup> Frazier’s mountain yeomen consider themselves to have little stake in the Confederate cause, which is repeatedly defined as the “big man’s” ownership of slaves; yet virtually everyone experiences some form of social or economic upheaval as a result of the war. To Esco and Sally Swanger, Federal raiders loom just as threatening as Teague’s lawless Home Guard. The moral decline of a civilization at war leads both Esco and Inman to doubt the altruism of Federal troops in their role as liberators of the enslaved, but the novel does not attempt to diminish or disassociate slavery as a cause of the war. Instead, Frazier engages multiple forms of slavery to recast both memory of the war and a myth of national selfhood rooted in the very foundations of American literature.

In tactical maneuvers of armies and the nobility of generals, Frazier claims to be “largely uninterested.”<sup>119</sup> At the end of the novel, his like-minded protagonist concludes that you could “tell such things on and on” and still never approach anything resembling the “full truth of the war” (*Cold Mountain*, 342). Frazier signals his departure from these themes when Inman recalls his youthful desertion of a teacher who lectured on “grand wars” and again when Inman climbs through a hospital window and walks away from the Confederate army. When Frazier represents combat, he abandons the perspective of commanding officers for the recollections of an enlisted soldier whose disillusionment—with religious doctrine, with humanity, with himself—drives Inman’s quest and Frazier’s literary revision.

While Frazier’s Lee maintains a godlike persona among the rank and file, Inman alone distrusts the judgment of a man who too readily confuses warfare with religious devotion. Inman considers Lee

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<sup>118</sup> Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), 141. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Cold Mountain*.

<sup>119</sup> Frazier, “Cold Mountain Diary.”

to be overly fond of war and suspects that “if given his preference” Lee would “general [his men] right through the gates of death itself.” Yet in the ranks of the Confederate army, where the words of “Marse Robert” carry the authority of “God himself,” Inman’s ruminations would be regarded as insubordination or heresy and, therefore, remain “unspeakable” (*Cold Mountain*, 8). As Inman recalls the battle of Fredericksburg to a blind vendor outside the hospital, he reveals a disparity between what can be communicated and what, like his view of Lee, cannot. He tells of fighting that he first experienced “in the way of a dream” and of a tableau he witnessed afterward—a Confederate soldier administering fatal hammer blows to the skulls of wounded men.<sup>120</sup> He does not tell of his recurring nightmares in which fragments of men on the battlefield “reformed themselves into monstrous bodies of mismatched parts.” One figure, who gazes directly at Inman and repeats his name, suffers wounds so ghastly that he “more resembled meat than man” (*Cold Mountain*, 10).

Though Frazier suggests a real incident of battlefield resurrection as the basis for the dream, Inman’s nightmare projects his worst fears about himself. After Fredericksburg, he observed a man attempting to steal the boots off the body of a Federal soldier, when the corpse “sat up and said something in an Irish accent so thick the only understandable word was Shit” (*Cold Mountain*, 9). Notably, the only discernible word in this incident speaks to the novel’s concern with abjection. With obvious parallels to Inman’s nightmare, this ostensible raising of the dead fits a larger trope in which Inman crosses and re-crosses the boundaries between life and death. With his appearance of having died, followed by his single intelligible utterance, the owner of the footwear embodies what Julia Kristeva defines as the abject: the repugnant parts of the self—“corporeal waste” but particularly the corpse itself.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Frazier said he incorporated a story he overheard from a veteran of World War II. “Old-Fashioned Ambitions Charles Frazier’s First Novel, *Cold Mountain*, is the Latest ‘Surprise Hit’ to Spend Many Weeks on the US Bestseller Lists: Eileen Battersby Meets a Quiet Author of Old-World Demeanour,” *The Irish Times* April 18, 1998, LexisNexis Academic.

In the first of three returns from death, Inman survives a gunshot to the neck that eventually lands him in the North Carolina hospital where the novel begins. Before it scabs over, the wound discharges a button and a piece of wool from his shirt collar, a shard of metal, and “unaccountably, something that closely resembled a peach pit.” Concerning this last item, Frazier writes, Inman could “never settle his mind on whether it was a part of him or not. He finally threw it out the window but then had troubling dreams that it had taken root and grown, like Jack’s bean, into something monstrous” (*Cold Mountain*, 4). While the tendency of the wound to clean itself suggests the regenerative powers of the body, all of the excreted objects are manmade, with the possible exception of the last. In its likeness to a peach pit, Inman associates the object not only with the fruit of man’s original sin, but with the seed that holds the power of reproduction. Despite an attempt to rid himself of it, a different, unsettling dream imagines the object taking root and sprouting something resembling Jack’s bean stalk or what might be read as something like the “old stock” of *Hamlet* or the blood of *The Killer Angels* battlefield. That dream and the unsettled question of whether the object is part of him suggests Inman’s anxiety that he possesses within him the seed of “something monstrous.” As his reflections turn from the teachings of Swimmer, the Cherokee youth Inman met at sixteen, to the belief that body and spirit could die separate deaths and to the conclusion that this has been Inman’s fate, the reassembled dream figures—particularly the one who no longer resembles a man—embodies Inman’s own self-concept as a mismatched figure of the grotesque, one with a living body and a dead spirit.

Along with the immortality of the soul, Inman has lost his belief in a place called heaven and the expectation that “we get to go there when we die” (*Cold Mountain*, 17). His experience so degrades his view of humanity that taking Fredericksburg as a “marker of current position,” Inman predicts “many years hence, at the rate we’re going, we’ll be eating each other raw” (*Cold Mountain*, 16). As

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<sup>121</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans., Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 3, 71, 108-109.

Inman dreams of men as meat, abdicates his belief in Christian redemption, and prophecies a future of cannibalistic predation, *Cold Mountain* begins where *The Killer Angels* concludes. If *The Killer Angels* is about cutting loose from humanity at the risk of never being able to return, then *Cold Mountain* is about the quest for redemption that follows. Though he rejects Christian theology, Inman also remembers fragments of a story Swimmer told about a place where mortal men could not “stay and live” but where “a dead spirit could be reborn” (*Cold Mountain*, 16). Though he no longer believes in heaven, Inman refuses to “abide a universe composed only of what he could see, especially when it was so frequently foul.” As Inman holds to the idea of “a better place,” his journey and the parallel story of Ada and Ruby convey their struggle to survive the destruction of their moral and material universe (*Cold Mountain*, 17). *Cold Mountain* is also a story of the protagonists’ longing for a better world than the one they inhabit and their quest for self-transformation.

Alternating with the account of Inman’s travels, Ada and Ruby’s efforts to restore Black Cove to a productive farm reveal the harsh reality of the homefront Inman idealizes as his destination. Ada accompanied her widowed father to Black Cove when Monroe chose a mountain ministry over a health resort as therapy for his respiratory ailments. His death and the departure of the hired laborers leave Ada alone and hungry on a farm she lacks all inkling of how to revive. Much to her neighbors’ surprise, she decides to stay in Black Cove, rather than return to her native Charleston. There, in years past, when members of her social circle asserted that “marriage is the end of woman,” meaning the ultimate female aim, Ada declared agreement but altered the meaning of “end” to imply a kind of social death. For such perverse behavior and her rejection of a marriage proposal that some thought “inexcusable,” Ada was judged a “type of monster, a creature not entirely fit for the society of men and women” (*Cold Mountain*, 50). By the time the novel opens, her father’s death and the prospect of returning to Charleston have come to occupy Ada’s nightmares.

Though Ada resists one patriarchy of marriage, she remains bound in other respects to her

father's impractical whims and to the economy of slavery. Ada counts among her skills an ability to draw; a familiarity with French, Greek, and Latin; and an extensive literary knowledge. She now considers this education to be of little value and decides she would have been better served by knowledge of "food production and preparation." Monroe insulated his daughter from "the hardness of work" and hired laborers to perform the tasks of day-to-day survival that Ada is now incapable of doing herself. In keeping with his fondness for Emerson, Monroe's main aspiration for Black Cove was not to make the farm functional but simply productive of "atmosphere." Monroe's prewar extravagances were financed by investments in rice, indigo, and cotton—all products of slave labor. His dividends paid the wages of the laborers he hired—free blacks, unlanded whites, and slaves, in which case Monroe compensated the bondspeople's legal masters. Though father and daughter owned no slaves directly, they participated in a slave-labor-based economy, profited from it, and formerly held a place in the highest strata of Charleston society. The family's dependence on hired labor prevents Ada from learning basic subsistence skills, but the war embargo and subsequent collapse of the commodities markets also leave her bankrupt.

With no cash, little knowledge of domestic economies, and a diminished motivation for productivity, Ada begins the novel rambling around an idle homestead. Hair unfastened, dress drawn from a pile of dirty laundry, she identifies her physical appearance with an illustration in novel bookplates—the image of the "madwoman" (*Cold Mountain*, 115). Literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify this figure as half of the angel-monster dichotomy historically imposed on female characters by male authors. Gilbert and Gubar theorize that as a response to this "literary confinement," nineteenth century women writers conjured the monster/madwoman in ways that represented their own revolt against patriarchy and domesticity.<sup>122</sup> Initially, the self-concept of Frazier's most well-read

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<sup>122</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xii, 17.

character rests on a literary type that is alternately a product of patriarchal literature and a rebellion against it. Ada's incarnation as "madwoman" occurs in her liminal existence between a self who resists but remains bound to patriarchal economies and an altered self who discards class and gender proscriptions with the aid of her friend and mentor Ruby Thewes. By the end of the novel, Ada doubts the authority of literary types, which presumably includes the figure of the madwoman. While Inman's fear of his own monstrosity echoes Michael Shaara's commentary on the nature of man, Frazier's evocation of the madwoman—and by extension the feminized angel-monster—further signals his authorial rebellion against combat stories that also render women invisible.

### **Slavery in *Cold Mountain***

Inman's journey begins where the squalid, stinking, rotting filth of the material world reflects both the condition of Inman's psyche and his estimation of humanity. In the hospital, mold grows in the pages of books; clean sheets sour under patients; gangrenous flesh smells like spoiled ham. Of his train ride from the field hospital, Inman recalls the heat of the boxcar and the reek of blood and excrement from wounded who suffered the flux. Even the landscape he flees appears to him "foul as the contents of an outhouse pit" (*Cold Mountain*, 12, 65). Though Kristeva's theory of the abject focuses on the individual, the foulness and decay of Inman's world suggests the most odious aspects of the human collective—the moral and social decomposition that Inman longs to escape.

Ruby presents a radically different perspective. Refusing to hire out as a servant, her condition for helping Ada restore her farm is an understanding that "everybody empties their own night jar" (*Cold Mountain*, 52). Her demand, Ada realizes, is "something on the order of equality" (*Cold Mountain*, 52). The terms of their agreement pose a stark contrast to what in Inman's view represents the most abject signifier of pestilence and human filth. In the women's verbal contract, the loathsome

job of tossing slops, which might otherwise enact a hierarchy of employer-servant, remains by mutual agreement the responsibility of each party. While Ruby recasts the material of human abjection into a premise of equality, another conversation renders bird droppings as part of multiple overlapping cycles of nature. Ruby explains how a seed is transported and fertilized to begin the tree's new growth. The materials of filth that Inman observes around him even in the landscape become, in Ruby's concept of nature, a critical component of natural renewal.

Elsewhere, though he finds himself chronically engaged in some form of violence, Inman manages to find respite in a camp of "show folk," whose occupants prove to be "as outlaw and Ishmaelite as himself." In common usage, Ishmaelite suggests an outcast or wanderer. In the Bible, Ishmael is the son of Abraham and his wife's slave Hagar. During her pregnancy, Hagar flees an abusive, jealous mistress and is visited in her wilderness refuge by an angel who prophesies of Ishmael, "His hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him."<sup>123</sup> As Inman walks home in search of redemption, he longs to return to the pacific existence of his prewar self, but he so often commits violence or becomes immersed in the moral and material filth of strangers, he sees himself like the Biblical figure Ishmael, fated to be perpetually "at odds" with other men (*Cold Mountain*, 96). Inman's outlaw status and his fears that monstrosity has made him unfit for companionship also correspond to the condition of Hagar as fugitive, exile and eventually, Frazier suggests, as slave.

In the camp, Inman encounters fellow travelers whose shared experience as outcasts forms the basis of their community. Here, Inman finds a temporary sense of belonging, where he otherwise must bear—or so he thinks—perpetual solitude as the punishment of the "unredeemed" (*Cold Mountain*, 245). Among these kindred wanderers is a medicine show troupe whose acts are constructed as caricatures of the actors' purported racial and ethnic backgrounds. They rely on ethnic objectification to entertain their customers and in doing so profit from their audience's preconceptions. The show, thus,

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<sup>123</sup> Genesis 16:12.

likens identity to the performativity of a theatrical role. Offstage, the members enact a social equity unlike anything Inman has encountered. Their mealtime customs reveal a society that does not observe sex, color, or ethnicity as markers of difference. Here, the communal sharing of a bottle and each person scouring his or her own dinner dishes signals the achievement of something akin to Ruby's demand that "everybody empties their own night jar."

In the chapter "Ashes of Roses," Ada and Ruby receive travelers who flee their burned out home in Tennessee and reach Black Cove after a series of wrong turns. The party consists of three women whose husbands are at war, six children, and a "pair of kind slaves" (*Cold Mountain*, 104). Though the enslaved husband and wife conform to plantation literature's caricature of the devoted slave, Frazier acknowledges that either of the slaves "might just as easily have cut every throat in the family any night as they slept" (*Cold Mountain*, 104). Upon their guests' arrival, Ruby and Ada prepare a feast of fried chicken, beans, boiled potatoes, squash, and biscuits. When the meal is ready to be served, Frazier writes, "they called in the visitors and sat them at the dining-room table. The slaves had the same fare, but ate out under the pear tree" (*Cold Mountain*, 105). It is unclear whether the host or mistress sends the slave couple outside or whether the man and woman merely observe a long standing custom of taking their meals separately. A far cry from the show folk's equal, inclusive meal and conversation, the institution of such disparity in the Cove violates the condition of equality that Ada and Ruby make the premise their labor bargain. The mealtime segregation represents an intrusion of social conventions, not unlike the gender- and class-based divisions that Ada flouted in Charleston and abandons altogether under Ruby's tutelage.

Though the bondspeople never tell their story, the dining room guests recount the confiscation and destruction of their property by Federal troops. After the soldiers' departure, the women set out with their few remaining belongings, including their human property. Though the storyteller recounts a tale of mutual hardship endured by all parties, the administration of the dinner indicates that even after



a shared experience of hunger and homelessness, race-based class constructions continue to order the relations of mistress and slaves. Unlike the motley company of the medicine show, the Tennessee travelers have not intuited that their relations are the product of social contrivance. The geographic disorientation of the travelers, who have made “a number of wrong turnings” and “missed their way,” signals confusion about their place in a society reordered by the Civil War. They continue to perform master-slave roles in the Cove, where necessity and mutual consent have established equality, but their turning up in a place with no outlet signifies the futility of continuing to observe those roles. It also foretells the party’s eventual arrival at a metaphorical “dead end” (*Cold Mountain*, 104).

The travelers’ destination, Camden, South Carolina, was also the residence of diarist Mary Chesnut, whose journal recounts her war experience in the inner circle of generals, politicians, and the Confederate first family. Chesnut also records her return to Camden at the end of the war. In the next two decades, between caring for her family and running a butter and egg business with former slave Molly, Chesnut revised and expanded her wartime diary into an unparalleled account that attempts to come to terms with Confederate defeat.<sup>124</sup> Frazier’s Tennessee travelers have yet to confront that reality but plan to end their migration in the same place Chesnut concludes her narrative of slavery and slavocracy’s demise.

During the dinner with the medicine show troupe, one of the men utters what seems to Inman a strange comment—that “someday the world might be ordered so that when a man uses the term slave it be only metaphoric” (*Cold Mountain*, 100). *Cold Mountain* presents only a handful of scenes that involve literal slaves, people who by legal definition are the chattel property of another. But much as the showman predicts, figurative slavery appears throughout the novel. In addition to his identification as “outlaw and Ishmaelite,” the narrative ascribes to Inman even stronger associations of figurative slavery.

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<sup>124</sup> Julia A. Stern, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War Epic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 218.

As Inman's tale of Fredericksburg attributes a hitherto unspeakable fanaticism in the commanding general, his recollection renders the fighting with a prominent subtext of race, class, and power. The seemingly omnipresent gaze of Lee and Longstreet, along with their spatial elevation, signifies a power differential between the generals and the men who do the exhausting, deadly work of fighting. While Inman grows fatigued from the repetitive firing and reloading of his rifle, the spectator generals spend the afternoon in comparative leisure, engaged in the discharge of bombast. By the end of the day, blown-back gunpowder covers the faces of the men and turns them "various shades of blue," reminding Inman of a "great ape" he had once seen in a traveling show. Suggesting both spectacle and the action of aping—as in mimicry or caricature—this earlier allusion to a show, powder-caked visages evocative of theatrical makeup, and the commanders' gaze all suggest a complex performativity, not unlike Frazier's subsequent rendering of race, class, and slavery. Perhaps most telling is that, besides Inman's low regard for the man the soldiers call "Marse Robert," what also remains unspeakable in the ranks is Inman's feeling that he "did not enlist to take on a Marse, even one as solemn and noble-looking as Lee..." (*Cold Mountain*, 8). The powder-caked soldiers and the "big men" who oversee them dramatize a kind of race-class performativity in their service to "Marse Robert." As they do, Inman's subsequent turn as "outlaw and Ishmaelite" casts him as a fugitive from a metaphorical slavery, which is not limited to the army service he ultimately flees.

Inman and his unlikely traveling companion Veasey are betrayed to the Home Guard for the reward of five dollars each. Their freedom commodified, the men are bound at the wrist by a long rope to fifteen other prisoners in an arrangement that evokes a slave coffle. The days are marked by "sameness" and a sluggish pace that Inman regards in much the same terms as he recalled the experience of combat, as a dream (*Cold Mountain*, 178). All the while, Inman's longing turns to two objects, his own freedom and the fantasy of his betrayer's "blood running" (*Cold Mountain*, 178).

The realization of both desires seemingly confirms Inman's earlier estimate of humanity.

Resolving no longer to be troubled with the captives, the guards execute their prisoners, and, in a manner more of sewing crops than interring the dead, they dig a “shallow bed,” strew the bodies, and cover them with about as much dirt as one would use to “plant potatoes” (*Cold Mountain*, 179). Not surprisingly Inman had “hated being sutured up with the others” on the coffle, just as he loathed being disarmed and compelled to “travel retrograde to his desires” (*Cold Mountain*, 177). In addition to the obvious lack of volition, the coffle poses a particular nuisance in that each time the line halts or commences a march, “he was yanked forward and his bound hands flew up before his face like a man in sudden need of prayer” (*Cold Mountain*, 177). Whether “he” refers to Inman, or Veasey tied directly in front of him cannot be definitely discerned from the passage. As the series of masculine pronouns obfuscates clarity and identity, the syntactical confusion reiterates the point suggested by the involuntary actions of the fettered hands. The narrative ceases to differentiate one prisoner from another precisely at the moment their fates and actions are, quite literally, tied to each other and to the group as a whole. This notion of a collective fate presents something of a contradiction for Inman, who reckons spiritual death in terms of social isolation. Here, being joined to other men marks a degradation that bridges the figurative and the literal. In his understanding, “being sutured up with the others” suggests a collective experience of bondage but specifically one created and defined by connection to other people. If *The Killer Angels* suggests, in Philip Beidler’s terms, an anxiety of “cutting loose” from humanity, Inman’s enslavement and execution on the coffle suggest a fear of inextricability. The danger of too much connectedness is a loss of agency in which the individual lives and dies tethered by unscrupulous men to a collective who fall “all bound together” (*Cold Mountain*, 179).

While the guard’s shot is not immediately fatal to him, Inman lacks the strength to raise himself from the earthen tomb. That Inman performs the more arduous task of not dying results from circumstances as arbitrary as the manner of his confinement. The round that strikes Inman first passes through Veasey’s shoulder and only grazes the flesh along Inman’s hairline. He falls hard but with his

face in the crook of his arm, leaving a pocket of air to breathe. He remains there until a pack of wild hogs drawn by the scent of death plow the ground with their snouts, exhuming limbs, heads, and eventually Inman. His emergence from live burial reenacts a convention of the nineteenth century slave narrative, which figures such entombment as the literalization of the social death inherent to slavery. It also literalizes what hitherto is only a symbolic, if horrifying, dream of the grotesque. As narrative and nightmare converge in Inman's second return from the dead, the text enacts what formerly has been played out only in Inman's unconscious.

All of this happens while Inman receives new bodily injuries and aggravates the old ones. After a brush with danger or a new commission of violence, the Petersburg injury either cracks open and leaks blood or simply throbs with pain. By noon on the day of Inman's disinterment, the "welt at his neck began to hurt as if in sympathy with its new brethren" (*Cold Mountain*, 181). While bodily injuries serve as a physical counterpart to metaphysical wounds, Frazier's careful phrasing evokes membership of a religious order and reminds readers of the spiritual implications of Inman's most recent wounds. It also connotes kinship and a common slogan of the abolition movement—"Am I not a man and a brother?" Inman's sympathetic wounds reframe brotherhood to suggest his metaphysical kinship with chattel bondspeople, a kinship also implied by his recent experience of the prisoner coffle.

Around this time, Inman has a fortuitous meeting with a slave who smuggles him into the farm where the bondsman is owned and where he allows Inman to recuperate. The secret aid rendered by the unnamed slave and his fellow bondspeople further iterates Inman's status as fugitive and what Frazier frames as Inman's unfreedom. The encounter marks a rare convergence in which the condition of legal chattel slavery meets the metaphorical slavery that characterizes Inman. From the initial roadside passing of two slaves herding a hog to Inman's sale, live burial, and disinterment by feral boars to the provisions offered by Inman's slave benefactor, these scenes consistently include the presence of swine. The trope can be understood from the Biblical story Veasey relates prior to his and Inman's capture.

Characterizing Legion's ailment as a "wounded spirit" and describing his retreat from mankind into the mountains, Veasey's story positions Legion as another Biblical counterpart to Inman. His is essentially a tale of rebirth through the intervention of Christ, who, according to Veasey "straightened [Legion] right out quicker than a dose of salts running through you." Scripture, however, tells of torment not by a "wounded spirit" but alternately of an "unclean spirit" and "many demons" who had entered Legion. According to book of Luke, these demons beg Jesus not to order their return to the abyss and are allowed to enter a herd of swine feeding nearby. Immediately, the swine rush into a lake and drown.<sup>125</sup> Whereas Veasey's omissions undermine both his credibility as spiritual counselor and the veracity of the story he tells, the dose of salts he offers up with Christian redemption suggests skepticism—as in taking his account with a proverbial grain of salt—and, more literally, a medicinal purgative used for evacuating the bowels. Thus, Veasey reduces the holy word, like so much else in Inman's world, to the abjection of human excrement.

Especially after his emergence from his earthen tomb, the butchering of swine coincides with Inman's commission of violence. As Inman departs from his slave benefactor, he thinks to pay the man generously for his aid but finds his pockets empty. In a novel especially concerned with changing economies and economic exchange, Inman's inability to compensate his benefactor anticipates E.L. Doctorow's consideration of slavery reparations in *The March*. In the progression of Frazier's narrative, the realization serves as segue for Inman's return to the site of his sale and his settling a debt of a different sort. Rarely in *Cold Mountain* are the characters' conscious imaginings realized in their material reality, but after several days' retracted journey, Inman finds his betrayer salting a ham in the smokehouse, where Inman fulfills his vengeance fantasy. Whether Junior survives what pooling blood suggests is a massive head trauma remains unclear. Less ambiguous is the fate of three Federal soldiers who raid the home of a Confederate war widow.

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<sup>125</sup> Luke 8:30-32.

After the raiders steal the hog Inman was supposed to butcher in repayment for Sara's aid—a theft that likely spells starvation for Sara and her baby—Inman tracks and kills the soldiers, lest they do the same to him and Sara. Inman rationalizes that by comparison to the field at Fredericksburg or the crater at Petersburg, the three murders before him are “near nothing.” Yet even as he seeks to diminish, if not justify his deeds, Inman speculates that “this might be a story he would never tell” (*Cold Mountain*, 250). Inman relates the story of Fredericksburg to the blind vendor at the hospital; his tale of Petersburg is Inman's response to Veasey's parable of Legion. Though he manages to articulate these earlier experiences, his judgment that the raiders' deaths are unspeakable distinguishes that morning's killing from Inman's earlier participation in battle.

After spending the remainder of the day slaughtering and preserving the hog he recovers, Inman's effort to shave results in a significant confrontation of self. He has worn a beard since the second year of the war, partly as convenience, partly because he dislikes looking at his own reflection. Upon Sara's suggestion, Inman removes a mask of sorts and reveals features he does not remember, a hollowness that is “more than just food hunger” and what Inman ultimately deems a “killer visage” (*Cold Mountain*, 252). He compares his own reflected image to Sara's “boy-husband” John, whose razor Inman now uses and whose clothes Inman now wears. When he first dons John's garment—and for the second time dresses in the vestures of a dead man—Inman ponders what grief the sight of him must cause Sara as he ostensibly steps into the role of her departed spouse. But the countenance looking back at him in the mirror is “all different” from the face of young John and, apparently, from the face that Inman recalls from two years earlier. Much of its horridness is the visual effect of rust spots that make his face “appear scabbed over with crusty wounds” (*Cold Mountain*, 252). A blood smear on his shirtsleeve likely precipitates the verdict of a “killer visage” (*Cold Mountain*, 252). After the day's occupation, Inman cannot tell whether the blood is of man or hog. The ambiguity emblemizes the moral degradation he tries but fails to escape. Despite his best efforts to extricate

himself from an ever devolving humanity, Inman continues to find himself covered in filth that in his view literally and figuratively characterizes the human condition. The mirroring scene unfolds as if to suggest not only the world's defilement of Inman but his fear of being a stain on humanity. He sullies John's clean shirt by indeterminable killing and replaces the boy's mirror image with one that by hideous illusion seems to reflect both Inman's body and spirit. The next morning's repast of boiled hog brains and scrambled egg brings Inman even closer to his prediction of a fully degraded humanity. The meal suggests an economy of thrift in its use of all possible cookery, but as the hen who laid the egg also pecked at the entrails of a dead raider, the breakfast seemingly completes a food chain only one step removed from the prophetic fulfillment of a humanity "eating each other raw."

Despite a degraded opinion of humanity and the realm he inhabits, Inman's trek begins from a refusal to believe in the finality of that foul realm. Even as he examines his "killer visage" in the rusty shaving mirror, he "trie[s] to believe such a face was not him in any true way and that it could in time be altered for the better" (*Cold Mountain*, 253). Inman's prospects for such alteration lie with the thought that Ada might "save him from his troubles and redeem him from the last four years" (*Cold Mountain*, 314). He also "suspect[s]" that "thinking forward" to the pleasure of holding a grandchild might have a similar soothing effect. But Inman's arrival at Black Cove offers no such homecoming as he imagines. With Ada gone into the mountains to perform a burial, Inman concedes that whatever restorative might be found in the vision of grandchildren, such imagining requires "deep faith in right order," which he does not have and does not know how to acquire. Heretofore, doubt functions as a form of resistance in which Inman refuses to submit to his circumstances. What the narrator describes as a "dark voice" pervades Inman's consciousness as he considers that a future and redemption might be unattainable. The voice says, "no matter how much you might yearn for it and pray for it, you would never get it. You could be too far ruined" (*Cold Mountain*, 315). In that moment, Inman reflects that "all the resurrection any man might expect" was the one given Veasey after Inman was unearthed by

foraging hogs and dragged his companion “dead from the grave” by the coffle rope that still bound them (*Cold Mountain*, 315). In his darkest moment of apostasy, Inman abandons the hope of a better world and considers his corporeal bondage absolute. But then, though he acknowledges that “you could become so lost in bitterness and anger that you could not find your way back,” he ultimately decides to extend his journey. His decision to follow the trail of footprints left by the burial party is not so much a recovery of faith as the perpetuation of Inman’s non-belief, by which he chooses not to subscribe to the despair of the dark voice. That modicum of uncertainty allows for the possibility that he may yet find redemption.

## **The Cause of the War**

Several of the characters express opinions that the war is waged in defense of slave ownership. While the Swangers’ main desire is the safe return of their sons, Esco articulates the principal cause of the dispute: “Every man’s sweat has a price for it. Big flatland cotton men steal it every day, but I think sometime maybe they’ll wish they’d chopped their own damn cotton” (*Cold Mountain*, 35). In partial fulfillment of that prediction, a group of outliers raid the home of a “leading slaveholder,” purportedly to seek revenge against a cohort they have come to blame for “the war and its related troubles” (*Cold Mountain*, 264). As Ada hears the political assessment of her mountain neighbors, only Mrs. McKennett—too consumed with the tragic romance of the war—does not acknowledge slavery’s preservation as the Confederate cause.

Meanwhile, his discussion with the goat woman who denounces slavery as the cause of the war prompts Inman to consider his own reasons for enlistment. The woman literally supplies salve for Inman’s wounds but also serves as a confidant who temporarily soothes his conscience. She expresses a view of slaveholding as universally detrimental but with effects differing by class. By her estimation,



slaveholding makes “the rich man proud and ugly” and “the poor man mean” (*Cold Mountain*, 217). She goes on to describe slavery as “a curse laid on the land.” She predicts God will “liberate” slaves and says fighting to maintain slavery is “against God.” Inman explains that he did not regard his enlistment as an act to preserve slavery, but he is unable to offer a satisfying answer to the question of “what stirred you up enough for fighting and dying?” Esco Swanger, the band of mountain outliers, and the goat woman all credit slave ownership as the cause of fighting. As the goat woman adds the taint of sin, Inman’s problem of being “smirched with the mess of other people”—which can be traced at least as far back as his fighting at Fredericksburg—suggests not just a class-power subtext regarding the “big men” of the army but Inman’s degradation by the enslavers of bondspeople (*Cold Mountain*, 95-96, 8). His failure to acknowledge the preservation of slavery as his reason for enlistment is not a denial of slavery as the principle cause of the war but an imputation of Inman’s fighting for a cause he cannot identify.

In response to the goat woman’s query about his willingness to fight and die, Inman says he might have been able to tell her four years earlier but at present does not know. His peculiar statement suggests both a failure of memory and an altered perspective that now deems the earlier cause irrelevant. Inman’s motives for fighting, which he alternately characterizes as the product of ignorance and a source of shame, further critique Mrs. McKennett’s genre of war literature and illustrate what Frazier elsewhere identifies as a truly lamentable aspect of the war. Whereas Inman bears the physical and metaphysical wounds of a man who fought for a cause that, in the author’s words, he “had not much relation to” Inman expresses a more definite conviction about the nature of the federal cause: “All I know is anyone thinking the Federals are willing to die to set loose slaves has got an overly merciful view of mankind” (*Cold Mountain*, 217). Though he does not challenge the goat woman’s views on the war directly, his commentary suggests that the motives of the Federal soldiers are no loftier or more directly engaged with the future of slavery than his own reasons for enlistment. While

Inman fails to account for the African American soldiers, many of them ex-slaves, serving in the Federal army, he also incorrectly represents the motives of enlisted white soldiers. According to historian Chandra Manning, “their wartime experiences convinced them that slavery must be destroyed in order to win the war and redeem the American Republic from sin.”<sup>126</sup>

Given his experience of people’s eagerness to slaughter and enslave one another, any notion that soldiers would sacrifice themselves for the liberty of other people is irreconcilable with Inman’s view of human depravity. Inman’s suspicions seem to find support in the activities of the outliers who assault and rob the slaveholder Walker. Though a leader has recently emerged who gives the society of cave-dwelling outlaws a “common creed” in blaming slaveowners for the war, the items stolen from the Walker home include a mahogany table, silver flatware and candlesticks, candles, and English china. The inventory is striking both for its connotation of finery and its function as either an implement or adornment for dining. “Tennessee store liquor,” the one comestible item taken in the raid, is of the kind elsewhere found to emit flavors of “smoke and leather and other things brown and rich.” By contrast, Starbrod’s “greasy yellow” moonshine is home brewed from stolen corn and “unmatched in rawness and potency” (*Cold Mountain*, 130, 84). As the outliers pirate signifies of material wealth, they do not seek retribution for other people’s enslavement, merely a greedy appropriation of Walker’s property. The leader-evangelist exploits the group’s shared understanding of the war as a defense of slaveholding in order to sanction further violence for personal gain.

## **Literature and Memory**

On his journey, Inman encounters Odell, the eldest son of a wealthy planter who has abandoned his birthright and now travels in search of the slave Lucinda, who was sold away by Odell’s father.

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<sup>126</sup> Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over*, 14.

Lucinda's understanding of the relationship remains inaccessible, but Odell's account is the novel's only consideration of slavery's sexual politics or its physical cruelty. After his father won her gambling, the recently married Odell became so infatuated with Lucinda that his father pulled him aside and advised him—coarsely and in terms that suggest coercion—to initiate a sexual relationship. According to Odell, he was “appalled” at the suggestion and explained that he was in love with Lucinda. That claim incited laughter from the father and the pronouncement that he had “raised a fool.” To remove her from the household and Odell's proximity, the father hired out Lucinda, but Odell continued to see her. His attentions eventually led to a sexual relationship, and after a year of clandestine visits to her cabin, Lucinda became pregnant. At that point, Odell “could bear it no more” and offered to buy Lucinda at any price the father might name. In reply, the father disparaged Lucinda and degraded what Odell apparently regarded as a loving relationship, prompting Odell to strike his father. As punishment, Odell was beaten by the plantation foreman and his younger brother and locked in the canning house for a week. On the second day of Odell's confinement, the father informed him that he had sold Lucinda to Mississippi. Upon his release, Odell took cash from his father's safebox and several pieces of his mother's jewelry and set out in search of Lucinda, whom he has never been able to locate (*Cold Mountain*, 131-134). Based on Odell's account, what seemingly places him at odds with his family is the father's attempt to dehumanize Lucinda and disabuse Odell of his regard for her. During Odell's confinement, the father's cruelty reduces his own son to “[baying] through the night like one of his coon [hunting] dogs” (*Cold Mountain*, 133). Odell's estrangement from his family vaguely recalls Henry Sutpen's repudiation of his birthright, while the unsuccessful search for Lucinda is reminiscent of similar failed attempts in *All the King's Men* and *Sophie's Choice* to locate bondspeople who have been sold away.

With few, but significant alterations, Odell's story also rewrites a scene from J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*. In his travels, Odell encounters a woman who is

locked in a cage and preyed upon by buzzards who have “pulled out one of her eyes,” and “torn strips of hide from her back and arms” (*Cold Mountain*, 134). In *Letters*, the authorial persona, Farmer James, meets a male slave who is caged, dehydrated and tortured by large birds of prey. As James relates, “the birds had already picked out his eyes; his cheek-bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places; and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds.”<sup>127</sup> Though he professes difficulty in doing so, James manages to leave the man and continue his journey to the big house, where he learns the slave was left to die as punishment for killing the plantation overseer. Odell never learns the reason for the woman’s punishment. He tries to render aid, but before he can decide what to do, the woman vomits blood and dies. Odell witnesses and later bears witness to the abject death of the woman he initially fears is Lucinda.

While *Letters* has most often been read as a fable of an American Eden, Teresa Goddu’s suggests an alternate interpretation. In *Gothic America*, published the same year as *Cold Mountain*, Goddu argues that James’s discovery of the slave constitutes a narrative rupture from which Crèvecoeur’s text never quite recovers. Drawing on Kristeva’s theory of the abject, Goddu identifies the encounter as a scene of live burial in which the tortured slave is both a Christ figure and a veritable corpse, which according to Kristeva is the “most sickening of wastes.”<sup>128</sup>

Goddu argues that Crèvecoeur’s slave embodies the abject because he disrupts James’s understanding of slavery and threatens to belie James’s very definition of America. Though he twice mentions the mental “oppression” which the scene induced, James’s ability to continue to the master’s house and feast on the fruits of slave labor, Goddu observes, suggests James does not identify with the slave but ultimately allies himself with the master. According to Goddu, “James represses the scene of

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<sup>127</sup> J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth Century America*, (1782; repr., New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 178.

<sup>128</sup> Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative History and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 20; Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 3.

abjection that could destroy his national narrative”; yet despite his best efforts to return to the Edenic myth, Goddu finds that his “recuperative acts retain traces of trauma” so that by letter XII, “James finds that the localized infection of letter 9 [slavery] has spread throughout the nation, becoming a deadly disease.”<sup>129</sup>

The traumatic traces Goddu finds in *Letters*, have not been widely noted, however, and Frazier seems to signify the slave scene precisely to unravel the myth of an American utopia for which Crèvecoeur’s text is best remembered. Odell, who signifies the slave encounter from *Letters* in his own account, does not detach himself from the enslaved woman to ally himself with a planter. Formerly the planter heir apparent, Odell disassociates himself from the planter by repudiating his own family. When Odell recounts the bodily mutilations he has witnessed, he does not attempt to repress the abjection or violence of slavery; but when he tells Inman, “You’ve never seen the like of meanness I have,” he is not entirely correct (*Cold Mountain*, 134). Odell’s tale, cursory though it is, is the fullest account of chattel bondage in the novel. *Cold Mountain* never deviates from the perspectives of its white characters or introduces the sustained voice of anyone who has experienced legal enslavement. Yet Inman has witnessed meanness. He has born it and committed in turn. As Frazier associates Inman’s experience with a kind of spiritual abjection or bondage, the troubles of his protagonists, who have little direct involvement with slavery, can also be traced to the “big man’s” ownership of slaves.

Frazier similarly reprises Crèvecoeur’s most famous meditation “What is an American?” in Inman’s final battle with the Home Guard. Crèvecoeur finds in pre-Revolutionary America “the most perfect society now existing in the world.” Here, in this American utopia, he writes, “we have no princes for whom we toil starve, and bleed.” And here, he insists, “man is free as he ought to be.” This “new man,” Crèvecoeur’s American, is “a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, German’s

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<sup>129</sup> Goddu, *Gothic America*, 21, 24.

and Swedes,” who acquire their American identity by their own labors.<sup>130</sup> As the author advances mythologies of the self-made man and the American melting pot, Crèvecoeur’s American is industrious, male, and white. Even as narrator James resolves in his final letter to seek refuge with an unnamed Indian nation rather than choose sides in the Revolution, he reveals an acculturation anxiety toward his soon-to-be neighbors.<sup>131</sup> Inman’s trek home reveals a civilization in nearly every way antithetical to James’s vision of perfection and equality, while the possibility of redemption for Inman rests in his adoption of Cherokee myth.

In his final shootout, Inman must commit violence for his survival, though the previous night’s reunion with Ada suggests he has put the war to rest. Inman speculates that the fair-haired boy Birch may have descended from German, Irish, or Dutch ancestors. But drawing on Crèvecoeur and a nineteenth century notion of whiteness as a prerequisite to national belonging, Inman concludes Birch’s ancestry to be of little consequence; he was “now American all through,” which Inman defines as “white skin, white hair, and a killer” (*Cold Mountain*, 351). Frazier reserves his one meditation on national identity for the moments leading up to Inman’s death in terms that echo, if only to refute, Crèvecoeur’s founding literary myth. Inman also observes that his adversary “looked as if his first shave lay still ahead of him, and Inman hoped not to have to shoot a boy” (*Cold Mountain*, 351). While the gunman’s beardlessness evidences youth, it also contrasts with Inman’s earlier shave on Sara’s porch. Birch, subsequently described as “a little wormy blonde thing” with hair “cropped close as if he had been battling head lice” becomes alternately the embodiment of parasitism, poor hygiene cum moral filth, and violence. His ostensible surprise at shooting Inman contrasts what may be the boy’s first commission of violence with Inman’s accumulated experience and ongoing self-confrontation with what he fears as the worst and unredeemable aspects of himself. The supposition that the shooter’s

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<sup>130</sup> Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 67-70.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 211, 213-214.

“first shave lay ahead of him” suggests that this thoroughly American boy has yet to face as Inman has a reflection of the darkest aspects of his and—according to Philip Beidler’s model—the American soul.

Much as Frazier invokes *Letters* and draws on conventions of the slave narrative, he similarly likens his protagonist’s experience to a tale told to Inman as a child by a Cherokee woman who claimed to be 135 years old. In the story, the people of the Cherokee village Kanuga are invited to leave this world of “constant fighting” for a place of peace. The villagers do as instructed to gain admission to the invisible utopia but are ultimately betrayed by one man, who loses his senses and shouts a war cry at the entrance. The actions of this one miscreant close the gateway to a better world. Not long afterward, the villagers were “driven away into exile, except for the few who fought and hid among the crags, living frightened and hunted like animals” (*Cold Mountain*, 198).

The Cherokee woman who told Inman the story had eluded the Federal army when they “scoured the mountains, gathering the Indians in preparation for driving them out on the Trail of Tears” (*Cold Mountain*, 196-197). Frazier reveals the story through Ada’s recollection of her and Inman’s first parting. In her formerly standoffish demeanor that she strives to overcome, Ada questioned the truth of the story, to which Inman replied, “I take it that she [the original teller] could have been living in a better world, but she ended up fugitive, hiding in the balsams” (*Cold Mountain*, 199). With a glimpse of that better world, which is lost to the fear, fighting, and depravity of this one, the story more accurately parallels Inman’s return to Cold Mountain than his initial departure, which occasioned its telling. To Ada, who remembers the tale in the context of a disappointing farewell, the misunderstood story suggests a different meaning, as a caution against her own aloofness. Attempting a more satisfactory sendoff, she visits Inman the next day and offers her apology in terms of her wish to “go back and revise” (*Cold Mountain*, 203).

As Ada’s former self expresses her regret in the language of textual rewriting, Frazier suggests the degree to which Ada’s changing relationship to literature marks her alteration of selfhood. In her

initial inventory of skill, Ada considers the fact that she is well read, but much of her unproductive summer consists of reading novels and then finding herself unable to recall much of their content. In the early days of reviving the farm, Ruby considers it a small victory when Ada ceases to slip a book in her pocket whenever she goes out to work. Ada, who first understands her situation through the literary figure of the madwoman also comes to question the scope of literary knowledge. Under Ruby's tutelage, Ada becomes increasingly able to read the workings of the natural world and finally concludes, as with Monroe's book of types, that "whatever a book said would lack something essential and be as useless by itself as the gudgeon to a door hinge with no pintle"—that is to say, quite useless. Indeed, throughout the novel, visual, textual, and sometimes even oral storytelling prove faulty forms of representation. Starbrod's fiddling stands as the one artistic medium that the novel does not devalue. Rather than situate the fleeting chords among other failed attempts at artistry, Ada considers his music evidence of Starbrod's transformation. Most notably, the vehicle of redemption for the former ne'er do well moonshiner came of his hearing and, to an extent, imitating slave spirituals.

Ada's elevation of music above all other art forms and her unfavorable judgment of books may seem a peculiar argument for a novelist and his most bookish character to advance, but a notable feature of *Cold Mountain* is the lyrical quality of its prose.<sup>132</sup> Frazier recalls that the oldest people he knew as a child spoke with an "odd kind of musical pattern of speech," and he wanted to reproduce those rhythms in his text.<sup>133</sup> As the novel achieves a musicality that it also casts as the preeminent art form, Frazier suggests a singular credibility for his own narrative, which situates his character's struggles during the Civil War within a broader meditation on time, history, and memory.

Ada and Inman's parallel narratives ultimately merge in the remnants of a Cherokee hunting

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<sup>132</sup> Christina Patterson, "The Week In Reviews: Books: Hope Is Where The Hearth Is," *The Observer* (London), July 20, 1997, LexisNexis Academic; Gussow, "A Civil War Deserter Reaches no. 1; How a Family Tale Became a Word-of-Mouth Phenomenon."

<sup>133</sup> Lindsay Mackie, "Travels in a Lost World," *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh, Scotland), July 19, 1997, LexisNexis Academic.



village, where the pair imagine the last family to occupy the cabin, remember their shared past, and plan a future together. Frazier situates the couple's parting, brief reunion, and shared mythmaking within the history of the Trail of Tears. The author of *Cold Mountain* places his protagonists not just in the epoch of the Civil War but widens the historical frame to situate his story of a changing world, traumatic loss, and healing within an earlier nation-to-nation violence that is inextricable from the U.S. expansion of slavery. His death descending the mountain completes Inman's association with the two Cherokee myths that frame his departure for war and his return home. *Cold Mountain* becomes quite literally the place where Inman cannot "stay and live" but where his "dead spirit" is "reborn." It is also the place where, by planning a future that never comes to fruition, fugitive Inman becomes like the Kanuga villagers. He glimpses a better world that is made inaccessible by Birch's bullet.

Inman's ability to imagine a future with Ada suggests at least a partial recovery of spirit. As the couple talk of the past, Frazier compares Inman's report of the war years to "the weak detail of a newspaper account." Inman judges such stories to be incomplete, "possibly misleading," and far removed from the "full truth of the war" (*Cold Mountain*, 342). As the passage reveals both Inman's and the author's weariness of battle narratives, Inman's epiphany on personal loss suggests an alternative to the collective mourning that pervades the decade's other popular war narratives:

You could grieve endlessly for the loss of time and for the damage done therein. For the dead and for you own lost self. But what the wisdom of the ages says is that we do well not to grieve on and on. [...] you can grieve your heart out and in the end you are still where you were. All your grief hasn't changed a thing. What you have lost will not be returned to you. It will always be lost. You're left with only your scars to mark the void. All you can choose to do is go on or not. But if you go on, it's knowing you carry your scars with you (*Cold Mountain*, 334).

In the novel's final pages, Frazier converts wounds—both physical and psychological—to scars. In Inman, Frazier creates a character whose own commission of violence as well as his class, racial, and ethnic identifications associate him with multiple traumas in the national past. Inman's apparent resolution not to mourn endlessly, much like his decision to follow the footprints in the snow,

prescribes a forward momentum and an orientation toward the future. Though not the one Ada and Inman collectively imagine, Frazier reveals a future in the novel's epilogue, dated 1874. A decade after the war, Ada and Ruby remain at Black Cove, as does Starbrod. Ruby has married Reid, and they have three sons. Ada is mother to a nine-year-old daughter. Frazier describes a communal dinner, followed by Starbrod's fiddling and Ada's reading of the story of Baucis and Philemon. Frazier also relates how four years earlier, Ada lost a fingertip while cutting trees alone on the ridge. Suggestive of healing and a return to functionality, Frazier relates that "it took the better part of a year," but the finger "healed so neatly, you would think that was the way the ends of people's fingers were meant to look" (*Cold Mountain*, 356).

## Chapter 11

### “Who Controls How History is Imagined?”: Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone*, and the Copyright War Over an Unauthorized Parody

In the spring of 2001, Houghton Mifflin Company, a publisher known for its textbooks and academic titles, prepared to release a novel that promised to “explode” the most pervasive story ever told about U.S. slavery and the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> The author of the forthcoming book, Alice Randall, conceived *The Wind Done Gone* as a direct refutation of a cultural myth that had become, in her words, “more powerful than history because it is better known than history.”<sup>2</sup> In Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* and its subsequent film adaptation, Randall found “a South without miscegenation, a South without whippings, a South without families sold apart”—in short, “a South that never, ever existed.”<sup>3</sup> *Gone With the Wind*, both the book and the film, notoriously depicts slavery as a benign, paternal institution, without so much as a hint of the biological relations that often existed between slaves and masters. Both versions of *Gone With the Wind* are also just as oblivious to slavery’s destructive force on enslaved families, many of whom were separated by sale, all of whom were expected to abide by the master’s will, even when it meant—as it does in Randall’s novel—parents sacrificing their own children. When Randall first read *Gone With the Wind* at age twelve, she found the book, “shocking,” for its positive portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan and for its stereotypes of slaves as foolish, incompetent, and unintelligent.<sup>4</sup> Before she read *Gone With the Wind* as an adolescent, Randall

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<sup>1</sup> “The Wind Done Gone: A Novel,” description of *The Wind Done Gone*, by Alice Randall, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Trade and Reference Publishers, <http://www.hmhco.com/shop/books/the-wind-done-gone/9780618219063>.

<sup>2</sup> “A Conversation with Alice Randall,” *A Reader’s Guide: The Wind Done Gone*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Trade and Reference Publishers, [http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers\\_guides/wind\\_done\\_gone/index2.shtml#conversation](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/wind_done_gone/index2.shtml#conversation) (accessed March, 22, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Alisa DeMao, The ‘Wind’ Storm Author Says Her Unauthorized Parody Answers Misconceptions of Slavery and the

was unaware that “there were people who had a sustained view that black people were intellectually inferior.”<sup>5</sup> It was a view that Mitchell extended to African American office holders during Reconstruction and a caricature Randall intended to scathe. Randall’s antidote to what she calls a “poisonous text” was to reimagine the world of *Gone With the Wind*, starting with her main character Cynara. The intelligent, beautiful, mostly self-educated ex-slave is the half-sister of Randall’s version of Scarlett O’Hara.<sup>6</sup> Randall’s strategy to “rebuke and scorn” a text she felt “dearly worthy” of ridicule involved numerous and extensive allusions to *Gone With the Wind*.<sup>7</sup> While she shifted the narrative focus to the entirely new story of Cynara’s life, Randall also created recognizable analogues to many of Mitchell’s characters and retold the most significant events in *Gone With the Wind* from Cynara’s perspective. None of that pleased the managers of Mitchell’s estate. In March 2001, SunTrust Bank sued the Houghton Mifflin Company on behalf of the Stephens Mitchell Trusts. SunTrust claimed that Randall’s forthcoming novel copied characters, settings, and events from *Gone With the Wind* without permission. The plaintiff sought an injunction to stop the publication of *The Wind Done Gone* and at least \$10,000,000 in damages.<sup>8</sup> Attorneys for Houghton Mifflin argued that Randall’s novel was parody and therefore a fair use of Mitchell’s work. The judicial rulings that determined whether the

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South Perpetuated by Famous Novel,” *Augusta (GA) Chronicle*, June 24, 2001, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>5</sup> “Songwriter And Novelist Alice Randall Talks About Her New Book ‘The Wind Done Gone’ and About Her Family and Career,” transcript of interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio (NPR), July 3, 2001, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>6</sup> “The Wind Done Gone and Finn: A Novel,” video recording of “Retelling our Myths for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” session with Alice Randall and Matthew Olshan, Southern Festival of Books, October 13, 2001, C-Span Video Library, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/WindD> (accessed March 17, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The initial complaint by SunTrust claimed, “the Mitchell Trusts have been and continue to be substantially injured and are entitled to: (a) temporary, preliminary and permanent injunctive relief restraining the Defendant from further publication, unauthorized copying and misappropriation of Plaintiff’s copyrighted works; (b) damages in amount to be determined at trial but not less than \$10,000,000 and/or statutory damages; (c) the Defendant’s profits attributable to its infringements; (d) the recall and destruction of all infringing copies of Defendant’s work; (e) the costs of this action; and (f) expenses of this action, including attorney’s fees.” “Summons and Complaint,” pp. 14-15, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Summons\\_and\\_Complaint.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Summons_and_Complaint.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

public would ever see Tara from the slaves' point of view also decided the extent to which copyright could be used to preserve the *Gone With the Wind* myth and, thus, control the cultural memory of slavery.

### ***SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company***

In *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company*, the opinions issued by the U.S. District Court in Atlanta and the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals dealt specifically with the plaintiff's motion for a preliminary injunction to halt the release of Randall's novel until the overall case could be decided. To have the injunction granted, the plaintiff needed to show that *SunTrust* was likely to prevail in the copyright lawsuit, that the plaintiff would suffer irreparable harm without the injunction, that the potential injury to the copyright holder of *Gone With the Wind* outweighed the potential harm an injunction might cause Houghton Mifflin, and that an injunction would not damage the public interest.<sup>9</sup>

Lawyers for the plaintiff emphasized a "loss of sales and profits" for the Mitchell Trusts if Houghton Mifflin were allowed to proceed as scheduled with a May 2001 release of *The Wind Done Gone*. "Unless Defendant is enjoined and restrained," the initial complaint asserted, the Mitchell Trusts, "will suffer immediate and irreparable harm and damage to their business reputation and goodwill, as well as the artistic reputation and goodwill of the novel *Gone With the Wind*."<sup>10</sup> The Mitchell Trusts claimed Randall's novel was, by definition, a sequel that continued the story of *Gone With the Wind*, with characters that were clearly recognizable as Mitchell's creations. "Because *The*

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<sup>9</sup> Charles A. Pannell, Jr., "Order issued April 20, 2001 Granting Plaintiff's Motion for a Preliminary Injunction and Enjoining Defendant for the Further Production, Display, Distribution Advertising, Sale or Offer for Sale of *The Wind Done Gone*," p.4, *SunTrust Bank, v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Order\\_4\\_20\\_2001.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Order_4_20_2001.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> "Summons and Complaint," pp. 16-17, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Summons\\_and\\_Complaint.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Summons_and_Complaint.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

*Wind Done Gone* is an unauthorized sequel,” the plaintiff claimed, “its publication will diminish, or preclude outright, the ability of the Mitchell Trusts to authorize and control future derivative works.”<sup>11</sup> Attorney Paul H. Anderson, an advisor to the Mitchell Trusts,<sup>12</sup> asserted that if *The Wind Done Gone* were released to the public, “The Mitchell Trust will have been deprived of its most basic right [as the copyright owner] to create and authorize derivative works and to control the way its copyrighted characters are portrayed.” Randall’s novel, Anderson contended, would set a precedent that allowed anyone, without consent of the copyright holder, to “retell the story of *Gone With the Wind* from another point of view or create sequels or prequels populated by the Mitchell characters.” The result, he warned, would be that “the potential market for *Gone With the Wind* derivative works would be destroyed, and the associated impact and loss of revenue would be incalculable.”<sup>13</sup>

Lawyers for Houghton Mifflin argued that *The Wind Done Gone* was a parody, intended to criticize *Gone With the Wind* and render a political commentary on the novel and its portrayal of slavery and African American characters. As such, they maintained, *The Wind Done Gone* was not a violation of copyright. Alice Randall insisted that she had always intended her book as a parody, not a sequel. She defined parody as “a book that uses characteristic elements of *Gone With the Wind* and imitates them in a way that makes them appear ridiculous.”<sup>14</sup> In written testimony, Randall wrote that she felt compelled to respond to a text that portrays blacks as “buffoonish, lazy, drunk and physically

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<sup>11</sup> “Memorandum of Law in Support of Plaintiff’s Motion for a Temporary Restraining order and preliminary injunction,” p.2, *SunTrust Bank Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Memorandum\\_Plaintiff\\_Restraining\\_Order\\_Preliminary\\_Injunction.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Memorandum_Plaintiff_Restraining_Order_Preliminary_Injunction.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Along with Thomas Hal Clarke, Anderson identified himself as “one of two surviving members of the committee established by the trust instruments to direct the plaintiff SunTrust Bank, as Trustee of the four Stephens Mitchell trusts.” Paul H. Anderson, “Affidavit of Paul H. Anderson, Esq. in Support of Plaintiff’s Motion for Temporary Restraining Order and Preliminary Injunction,” p. 1, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Affidavit\\_Paul\\_Anderson.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Affidavit_Paul_Anderson.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Alice Randall “Declaration of Alice Randall,” p.1, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Declaration\\_Alice\\_Randall.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Declaration_Alice_Randall.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

disgusting, and, in which they are routinely compared to ‘apes,’ ‘gorillas,’ and ‘naked savages.’”<sup>15</sup> A sequel or a “mere retelling” of *Gone With the Wind*, Randall explained in court documents, “would endorse the very racial and political views that I find so offensive.” With *The Wind Done Gone*, Randall said her intent was to “transform totally what I considered to be destructive fiction, and ask through my own literary invention, how it came to have such cultural influence.”<sup>16</sup> The defense maintained that extensive evocation of *Gone With the Wind* was necessary to conjure the original text in Randall’s critical parody.<sup>17</sup> Randall asserted that she “could not effectively parody *Gone With the Wind*...without creating through a series of parallels, a cast of characters with the full, credible lives that they had been denied in *Gone With the Wind*.”<sup>18</sup>

In his statement on behalf of the defense, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., professor and then-chair of the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard, attested that *Gone With the Wind* is “widely regarded in the black community as one of the most racist depictions of slavery and black slaves in American literature.” Gates, who first saw the film adaptation as a seventeen-year-old in Keyser, West Virginia, recalled his astonishment when white theater-goers wept at the demise of the old South. “If you are a black person, as I am,” Gates wrote, “the death of the ‘Old South’ meant the liberation of one’s ancestors. It is an occasion for celebration.” *Gone With the Wind*’s “embarrassing depictions” of slave characters, he observed, “have taken decades for black authors to overcome.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>17</sup> “Transcript of Preliminary Injunction Hearing, April 18, 2001, Before the Honorable Charles A. Pannell,” pp. 50-51, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Transcript\\_Preliminary\\_Injunction\\_Hearing.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Transcript_Preliminary_Injunction_Hearing.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Randall, “Declaration of Alice Randall,” 6.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Declaration of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,” n.p. *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Declaration\\_Henry\\_Louis\\_Gates.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Declaration_Henry_Louis_Gates.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

Situating *The Wind Done Gone*, within a long tradition of parody in African American narrative, Gates explained that Randall's novel belonged to a genre that scholars consider to be "at the heart of African American expression, because it is a creative mechanism for the exercise of political speech, sentiment, and commentary on the part of people who feel themselves oppressed or maligned and wish to protest that condition of oppression or misrepresentation." Randall's novel, Gates also explained, "constitutes both an original work of art and a moving act of political commentary, deconstructing as it does a text that many scholars believe to be racist." Also suggesting Randall's novel as a counterpoint to his early theater experience, Gates wrote, "I laughed until I wept when I read *The Wind Done Gone*."<sup>20</sup> He added, "At last the slaves at Tara have found their voices, and I say, "Amen!"<sup>21</sup>

For the Mitchell Trusts, the potential of Alice Randall's novel to diminish the market for authorized *Gone With the Wind* sequels was more than a theoretical concern. The first authorized sequel, Alexandra Ripley's *Scarlett*, was published in 1991. In January 2001, approximately two months before the lawsuit was filed against Houghton Mifflin, the Mitchell Trusts authorized the writing of another follow-up to *Gone With the Wind*, a novel to be told from the perspective of Rhett Butler.<sup>22</sup> Hope Dellon, executive editor of the Trade Division of St. Martin's Press, was especially concerned about the market for *Gone With the Wind* derivatives because St. Martin's had "paid well into seven figures for the right to publish the second sequel to *Gone With the Wind*."<sup>23</sup> The agreement included a provision that the Mitchell Trusts would authorize no other sequels until after St. Martin's

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Declaration of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," n.p.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Paul H. Anderson, "Supplemental Affidavit of Paul H. Anderson, Esq. in Further Support of Plaintiff's Motion for a Temporary Restraining Order and Preliminary Injunction," pp. 1-2, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Supplemental\\_Affidavit\\_Paul\\_Anderson.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Supplemental_Affidavit_Paul_Anderson.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Hope Dellon, "Affidavit of Hope Dellon," p.3, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Affidavit\\_Hope\\_Dellon.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Affidavit_Hope_Dellon.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).



published the book identified in court papers as “the Second Sequel.” Dellon considered this protection “a key point of negotiation” for the publisher. As she explained in her court affidavit, the “appeal and financial success of sequels” depends largely on the public desire to learn more about the characters, but as each successive sequel adds additional details, the “mystery and suspense that drove the market for those sequels begin to dissipate.”<sup>24</sup> At oral arguments, SunTrust attorney Richard Kurnit restated the threat *The Wind Done Gone* posed to his client: “They are going to publish a book. It is going to tell a whole story about Rhett Butler and they are going to beat us to the marketplace with ours.”<sup>25</sup> The plaintiff also expressed concern that readers would mistake *The Wind Done Gone* for a novel that had been officially licensed and endorsed by the Mitchell Trusts. During oral arguments, defense attorney Jerre B. Swann informed the court his client had passed him a note offering to print “unauthorized parody” as large as the plaintiff wanted across the cover.<sup>26</sup>

If the timing of *The Wind Done Gone* complicated the deal for an authorized sequel, the SunTrust lawsuit against Houghton Mifflin was only the most recent episode in a long and vigorous campaign to defend the copyright of *Gone With the Wind*. When Margaret Mitchell sold the film rights to her novel, the contract included a clause that required the author to protect the *Gone With the Wind* copyright in the U.S. and abroad. The provision was intended to prevent the release of films that would compete with David O. Selznick’s, but the contract placed the burden on Mitchell to guard against any unauthorized use of *Gone With the Wind*.<sup>27</sup> Assisted by her husband, legal advisers, and occasionally the State Department, Mitchell learned to navigate the ins and outs of international copyright law, which often varied by country. She spent substantial energy and financial resources battling pirated

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>25</sup> “Transcript of Preliminary Injunction Hearing, April 18, 2001, Before the Honorable Charles A. Pannell,” 81.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>27</sup> Ellen F. Brown and John Wiley, *Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind: A Bestseller’s Odyssey From Atlanta to Hollywood* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2011), 113.

editions of her work. Long after Selznick agreed that she had fulfilled her obligation under terms of their contract, Mitchell maintained her vigilance in combating the use of her characters and other elements of her novel.<sup>28</sup> When the magazine *Screen Guide* ran a contest to see which of its readers could write the best continuation of Rhett and Scarlett's story, Stephens Mitchell, acting as his sister's legal counsel, sent a letter charging the magazine with "unauthorized use of Mitchell's 'title, character, plot, color, and atmosphere.'"<sup>29</sup> The magazine printed an apology and conceded that only Margaret Mitchell had the right to continue the story of *Gone With the Wind*.<sup>30</sup> Such attempts at fan fiction and unauthorized sequels were particularly offensive to Margaret Mitchell. In a 1948 letter to Wallace McClure of the U.S. Treaty Office, Mitchell detailed her struggles to retain control of her story and characters: "I have put in ten years in this country politely or sternly forbidding people to write sequels to 'Gone With the Wind,' or 'last chapters.' In wearying numbers well-meaning people decide to write another volume for me, and equally well-meaning people write a 'last chapter' and try to get it published publicly or privately." Of particular concern was a magazine in France offering prizes for "four or five of the best last chapters" to *Gone With the Wind*. Mitchell worried that if she did not contest such unauthorized continuations of her story, "the next thing I knew would be that people all over Europe were writing and marketing sequels to 'Gone With the Wind.'"<sup>31</sup> After the death of Mitchell, followed by her husband John Marsh, ownership of the copyright passed to Stephens Mitchell, who had been involved in the management of *Gone With the Wind* as a legal adviser. He initially maintained his sister's opposition to sequels, but with the copyright set to expire, Stephens Mitchell reasoned that the best deterrent to a barrage of shoddy sequels would be a continuation written

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>29</sup> Stephens Mitchell to the Celilia Company, August 8, 1940, New York Public Library, quoted in Brown and Wiley, *Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind*, 217.

<sup>30</sup> Brown and Wiley, *Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind*, 217.

<sup>31</sup> Mitchell and Harwell, *Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind Letters*, 410.

by an author of his choosing. Under the arrangement, the Mitchell estate would retain the copyright. Since then, acts of Congress have twice extended the period of time a work remains protected by copyright. *Gone With the Wind* now remains under copyright until 2031. The authorized sequel *Scarlett* was published in 1991 and was developed into a television miniseries. Agents of the trusts that Stephens Mitchell established for his two sons also entered into negotiations with novelist Pat Conroy to write a sequel from the point of view of Rhett Butler. Those negotiations eventually broke down, and the estate chose Donald McCaig to write a novel from Rhett's perspective—the “Second Sequel,” which St. Martin's Press held the right to publish.<sup>32</sup>

The contract for the “Second Sequel” also stipulated that neither Scarlett O'Hara nor Rhett Butler could die, a condition the plaintiff said would “[preserve] the expectations of an avid reading public, as well as the Mitchell Trusts' ability to authorize sequels in the future.”<sup>33</sup> Accounts of the failed negotiations with Pat Conroy suggest that, along with the survival of the main character, the Mitchell Trusts sought to impose additional restrictions. When he was still being considered to author the new authorized installment, Conroy wanted to “write one of the great death scenes in all of literature” and “bring the world to its knees with the death of Scarlett.”<sup>34</sup> The Mitchell Trusts would not allow the heroine to be killed, so Conroy proposed a compromise: He would leave Scarlett alive at the end of the novel but asked to be allowed to write her death scene and deposit it in the archives of the

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<sup>32</sup> Brown and Wiley, *Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind*, 297, 299, 309, 312-314.

<sup>33</sup> William B. B. Smith, Ralph R. Morrison, and Anne M. Johnson, “Memorandum of Law in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for a Temporary Restraining Order and Preliminary Injunction,” p.17, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Memorandum\\_Plaintiff\\_Restraining\\_Order\\_Preliminary\\_Injunction.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Memorandum_Plaintiff_Restraining_Order_Preliminary_Injunction.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Pat Conroy to Thomas Hal Clarke, Paul Anderson, and Owen Laster, November 10, 1998, submitted as attachment to “Affidavit of Thomas Hal Clarke, Esq. in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for Temporary Restraining Order and Preliminary Injunction,” *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Affidavit\\_Thomas\\_Hal\\_Clark.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Affidavit_Thomas_Hal_Clark.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012). Clarke submitted the letter to rebut the Defendant's charges of racism in *Gone With the Wind*. In the letter, Conroy asserts that the objects of Margaret Mitchell's scorn are not the black characters but poor whites.

Mitchell estate. When the copyright expired, he suggested, the scene might be published by the estate. Court records do not reveal how Conroy might have handled the character's demise, and negotiations ended shortly thereafter. Mitchell Trust advisor Thomas Hal Clarke said the estate withdrew when Conroy's agents tried to change the financial terms.<sup>35</sup> Conroy gave a different account of the estate's efforts at creative control. When he learned the Mitchell Trusts were interested in having him write a sequel, Conroy said, his agent also informed him that representatives of the estate wanted Conroy to "sign a pledge that says you will under no circumstances write anything about miscegenation or homosexuality." Conroy, who thought the condition "the stupidest thing I've ever heard," instructed his agent to tell the estate "my first line is going to be this; after Rhett Butler made love to Ashley Wilkes, he lit a cigarette and said, Ashley, did I ever tell you my grandmother was black.'"<sup>36</sup> He was later told he would not be required to sign "such a hateful and humiliating proviso," but as negotiations progressed, Conroy said, "that ugly little phrase kept coming up again and again, the one about homosexuality and no miscegenation." Just when he expected to finalize an agreement, by Conroy's account, Hal Clarke returned to the subject, and Conroy walked out of the meeting. In the same letter that proposed a compromise on Scarlett's death—apparently written when Conroy still hoped to strike deal—the novelist expressed his concern that conditions imposed by the trusts, including their position on "miscegenation, homosexuality, the rights of review and approval," felt to him too much like "censorship." Careful not to offend the trusts' advisors, Conroy allowed that censorship was perhaps not their intention but how he perceived the conditions they wanted to impose. While promising to honor the estate and Margaret Mitchell's memory, Conroy's letter frankly declared, "I cannot take

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Hal Clarke, "Affidavit of Thomas Hal Clarke, Esq.," 2.

<sup>36</sup> Pat Conroy, "Declaration of Pat Conroy," *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Declaration\\_Pat\\_Conroy.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Declaration_Pat_Conroy.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

Scarlett as a date to the Censor's Ball."<sup>37</sup> Whether their differences were ultimately financial or creative, Conroy was never commissioned to write the sequel, but the estate's opposition to the death of the main character reemerged in the contract for the "Second Sequel" and as one of the Mitchell Trusts' strongest stated objections to *The Wind Done Gone*.

In court filings, attorneys for SunTrust reiterated that as the copyright owner, the Mitchell Trusts held "the exclusive right to authorize derivative works and to control the fate of their characters." Alice Randall and Houghton Mifflin, they asserted, had "usurped that right" with specific plot and character developments in *The Wind Done Gone*: "Debt Chauffeur leaves Other and marries Cynara; Mammy dies; Other dies; Cynara returns to Tata for Mammy's funeral; and learns from Miss Priss that Mammy killed Other's three baby brothers ... Thus, in one fell swoop Defendant has killed off two of the core Mitchell characters, Scarlett and Mammy, and married a third, Rhett, to a stranger." The plaintiff added that Randall's book "may even jeopardize the publication of the Second Sequel, whose author has been contractually prohibited from writing in the death of Scarlett."<sup>38</sup> The plaintiff's argument is a curious one, given that Mammy's death and Rhett's marriage to another woman, albeit under different circumstances, also occur in the novel and miniseries *Scarlett*, both authorized by the Mitchell Trusts. A footnote in the court filing suggests the objection specifically concerned Randall's dismantling of the Rhett-Scarlett romance. The note stated, "Moreover, the particular actions of Defendant, in killing two core 'Gone With the Wind' characters and marrying off another, have the immediate effect of damaging, or maybe even precluding, the Mitchell Trusts' ability to continue to tell the story of Scarlett and Rhett."<sup>39</sup> More than merely making a reunion impossible for the Rhett and

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<sup>37</sup> Pat Conroy to Thomas Hal Clarke, Paul Anderson, and Owen Laster, Affidavit of Thomas Hal Clarke, Esq. in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for Temporary Restraining Order and Preliminary Injunction."

<sup>38</sup> Smith, Morrison, and Johnson, "Memorandum of Law in Support of Plaintiff's Motion for a Temporary Restraining Order and Preliminary Injunction," 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, n.6.

Scarlett counterparts, *The Wind Done Gone* assumes that R. always preferred Cynara to her half-sister and that Cynara engineered R. and Other's courtship. The plaintiff does not say so explicitly, but *The Wind Done Gone* devalues the central romantic tension of *Gone With the Wind*, along with its main character; their only relevance in Randall's novel relates to Cynara's emotional development.

Aside from the death of Scarlett, *The Wind Done Gone* incorporates the same two themes that the Mitchell Trusts' advisors reportedly tried to exclude from the unwritten Pat Conroy sequel—homosexuality and miscegenation. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Dreamy Gentleman, Randall's counterpart for Ashley Wilkes, has a sexual relationship with a male slave. While the mere mention of such a relationship violates the double taboo Conroy says the Mitchell Trusts tried to impose on his work, it also transforms key characters and plot elements of *Gone With the Wind*. The counterpart to Mitchell's most virtuous character, Melanie Wilkes, becomes a vengeful murderess in *The Wind Done Gone*. More importantly, as she attempts to answer the question, "Where are the mulattos on Tara?" Randall reasonably assumes that miscegenation would have been as much a part of the fictional Old South as it was in reality.<sup>40</sup> The central character Cynara is the child of a black slave and the white planter who owned her. Cynara's relationship with R. explores the sexual politics between the interracial couple, one of whom once owned the other as property. Randall also imagines her Scarlett analogue to be the great-great-granddaughter of a black woman, whose color is a closely guarded secret. The Mitchell Trusts' objection that Other's death and Rhett's marriage to someone else denies them the ability to control the fates of the characters is a difficult one to accept at face value. Randall does marry her version of Rhett to someone other than Scarlett, but then so does Alexandra Ripley in the first authorized sequel, before finally reuniting the pair. What the estate may have deemed more problematic than Other's death or R.'s re-marriage is how R.'s longtime relationship with Cynara diminishes the one he had with Other (Scarlett) and, more significantly, how Other's maternal ancestry and Cynara's

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<sup>40</sup> "A Conversation with Alice Randall," *A Reader's Guide: The Wind Done Gone*.

very existence upset the divisive notions of racial identity that pervade Mitchell's novel. In his book *Representing the Race*, literary scholar Gene Jarrett supposes that not merely the "actual death" of Scarlett's counterpart but "the symbolic death of her character—her racial death as a purely white woman" underlay the Mitchell Trusts' objections to Randall's novel.<sup>41</sup>

Since one of the considerations for the preliminary injunction involved the question of public interest, several petitioners who identified themselves as "writers, scholars, entertainers, and citizens of the United States," urged the court not to enjoin *The Wind Done Gone*. The petition stated in part that the "extraordinary popularity" and "unique mythical status" of *Gone With the Wind* had made the novel "a prime source of knowledge about plantation life for much of mainstream America." The petition averred the "urgent need" for a counterperspective and for Randall's commentary to become part of the national conversation about slavery.<sup>42</sup>

"What Miss Randall's book does," wrote novelist, scholar and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison "is imagine and occupy narrative spaces and silences never once touched upon nor conceived of in Mrs. Mitchell's novel: that is the interior lives of slaves and ex slaves, their alternate views; their different journey." In her declaration to the court, Morrison outlined the lawsuit's implications for cultural memory and noted the apparent contradiction posed by the Mitchell Trusts' request to enjoin. "Considering the First Amendment right properly accorded *Gone With the Wind*, in spite of the pain, humiliation and outrage it's a-historical representation has caused African Americans, it seems particularly odd for the Mitchell estate to deny this clever but gentle effort to assuage the damage *Gone With the Wind* has caused." Morrison continued, "The real point of the request to enjoin, the question

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<sup>41</sup> Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Representing the Race: A New Political History of African American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 157.

<sup>42</sup> Statements of Harper Lee, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Shelby Foote, Charles R. Johnson, John Berendt, Nell Painter, John Egerton, Ward Just, Steve Earle, Ben H. Bagdikian, Catherine Clinton, Robert A. Brown, Adam Hochschild, Reginald Hudlin, A. Yvette Huggins, Linda Hutcheon, Nick Kotz, Michael Kreyling, Lucius T. Outlaw, Andrea U. Simpson, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Statements\\_Authors.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Statements_Authors.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

that seems to me to underlie the debate is ‘Who controls how history is imagined?’ ‘Who gets to say what slavery was like for the slaves?’ The implication of the [Mitchell Trusts’] claims suggests a kind of ‘ownership’ of its slaves unto future generations and keeps in place the racial structures *Gone With the Wind* describes, depends upon, and about which a war was fought.”<sup>43</sup>

At the preliminary injunction hearing, Richard Kurnit, an attorney for the Mitchell Trusts argued that Randall had simply appropriated recognizable elements of *Gone With the Wind*, without critical comment or parody and that Randall and Houghton Mifflin were not entitled to a fair use defense. He implied that the publisher merely invented the claim of parody in response to the filing of the lawsuit and went on to assert that a parodist may only use as much material “as is necessary to conjure up” the original work. In this case, Kurnit claimed, Randall accomplished that with her author’s note. Subsequent use of Mitchell’s story and characters, he implied, could not be justified.<sup>44</sup> Throughout his oral argument, Kurnit insisted that *The Wind Done Gone* was not a parody, that Randall’s narrative was “derivative, not transformative,” and that the author had appropriated *Gone With the Wind* to write a “revisionist novel,” which is not protected by a fair use defense.<sup>45</sup>

Joseph Beck, representing the Houghton Mifflin Company, insisted that *The Wind Done Gone* was a parody and always had been conceived as a parody. Quoting the declaration from Anton Mueller, Beck reminded the court that Randall told her editor in 1999, nearly two years before the lawsuit was initiated, that she was “writing a parody, p-a-r-o-d-y, of *Gone With the Wind*, that would skewer the book for its treatment of African Americans.”<sup>46</sup> He also noted that Randall’s contract refers to the book

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<sup>43</sup> Toni Morrison, “Declaration of Toni Morrison,” p.3, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Declaration\\_Toni\\_Morrison.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Declaration_Toni_Morrison.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> “Transcript of Preliminary Injunction Hearing, April 18, 2001, Before the Honorable Charles A. Pannell,” 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 23, 26, 30.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



as a parody.<sup>47</sup> During the plaintiff's argument, Richard Kurnit cited Randall's evocation of the first and last lines of *Gone With the Wind* as examples of what he considered infringement. In his reply, Joseph Beck sought to demonstrate how Randall transformed the line "After all tomorrow is another day" into "For all those we love for whom tomorrow will not be another day, we send the sweet prayer of resting in peace." The first line, he explained, "expressed Scarlett's optimism and her hope for another day." Randall's version, he argued, functions as "a haunting reminder of the memory of the slaves for whom there would not be another day, and that is exactly what the law permits."<sup>48</sup>

Citing declarations from Houghton Mifflin's literary experts, Beck asserted that the definition of parody on which the professors all agreed—"a work of literature which imitates or references another work, and in doing so, comments, usually in order to ridicule"—was consistent with the legal definition of parody that the Supreme Court outlined in *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music*—"a literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or work for comic effect or ridicule." According to Beck, that definition also applied to *The Wind Done Gone*. What the Mitchell trusts called copyright infringement was actually an essential feature of parody. The nature of the genre, Beck argued, required a parody to imitate the original work in order to comment upon it. Thus Randall's parody of *Gone With the Wind* necessitated extensive evocation of Mitchell's novel. "That's what they call blatant copying," Beck told the court. "It's got to imitate it to parody it. You can't parody it unless you conjure it up."<sup>49</sup> In his reading of the *Campbell* case, Beck emphasized that the new work must comment upon the original and, quoting the Supreme Court decision, that "parodies must take enough of the original work... 'to make the object of the parody's critical wit recognizable.'" <sup>50</sup> Beck went on

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 50, 54.

to address the testimony of Gabriel Motola, a plaintiff's expert on parody, whose declaration quoted from *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Beck noted that the witness's quotation omitted a key statement: "as a branch of satire, parody's purpose may be corrective as well as derisive."<sup>51</sup> This aspect of parody embodied the central purpose of *The Wind Done Gone*, which Randall described in court documents, marketing materials, and interviews. As Beck explained to the court, *The Wind Done Gone* "seeks to correct through parody at least some of the unfortunate and unfair but enduring portrayals of blacks and of slaves in America."<sup>52</sup> Randall, he asserted, "was taking on the book [*Gone With the Wind*] and its position in American culture, and particularly the parts of *Gone With the Wind* that portray slaves, freed slaves, and their relations with whites in the south." In order to do that, Beck argued, Randall could not simply have relied on minimal allusions, as the plaintiff suggested: "You can't take a chapter of *Gone With the Wind*, parody it, and then copy the rest of the book. You have got to parody all the way through."<sup>53</sup> Reminding the court that "parody is a creative mechanism for the exercise of political speech and commentary on the part of people who feel themselves oppressed," Beck asserted that one of the reasons the law allows parody as a protected form of criticism is "because it has bite, because it has political overtones." *Gone With the Wind*, Beck contended, "is an especially appropriate target for political satire, for political parody, because of what the book stands for in the minds of millions of Americans and others around the world, and especially in the book form."<sup>54</sup> As he reiterated in later arguments, "Almost no other work in America is so fair game for comment and criticism" as *Gone With the Wind*.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 72.

Houghton Mifflin's legal team submitted into evidence a catalog of racist language included in *Gone With the Wind*, a compilation Beck admitted he and his colleagues found "difficult even to prepare." Twice during oral arguments, Beck read excerpts to the court. One sample included the statements, "Darkies are like children and must be guarded from themselves like children," "Emancipation has just ruined the darkies," "Many Negroes are scarcely one generation out of the African jungles," and "The Negroes were far better off under slavery." "That's the world of Margaret Mitchell," Beck said, and while the First Amendment allowed her to write those lines, it also assured Alice Randall and Houghton Mifflin the right to offer a contradictory perspective. Moreover, Beck suggested that the Mitchell trusts were attempting to use the copyright law to insulate *Gone With the Wind* from criticism, in order to preserve its myth of slavery, Civil War, Reconstruction. Summarizing the statements of plaintiff's expert Kevin Anderson, Beck asserted, "He says there will be harm because it will taint *Gone With the Wind*...That's exactly what a parodist can do...The fact that someone criticizes someone, ridicules, is exactly what parody can do. And so Mr. Anderson may be eloquent, but he is wrong on the law. You can taint."<sup>56</sup> Finally, rephrasing the question posed by Toni Morrison, Beck asked, "Who controls how history will be reimagined?" He accused the plaintiff of making what he considered a "soft pedal but a recurring appeal to sentiment about *Gone With the Wind*, to sentiment about the South." Apparently attempting his own appeal to their shared regional identity, Beck declared, "Well, I'm southern too, Your Honor, and they misread the South. The South, you and I know, is big enough to hear more than one voice about slavery, slaves and reconstruction [sic]."<sup>57</sup>

"Who controls how history is imagined?" was not a question District Court Judge Charles Pannell, Jr. considered relevant to the case, and he said as much when issued an injunction to stop publication of *The Wind Done Gone*. According to Pannell, the answer to Morrison's question was

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 79.

“anyone who chooses to write about historical events, whether in history or fiction”; but in Pannell’s view, “The question before the court, is not who gets to write history, but rather whether Ms. Randall can permeate most of her new critical work with the copyrighted characters, plot, and scenes from *Gone With the Wind* in order to correct the ‘pain, humiliation and outrage’ of the ‘a-historical representation’ of the previous work, while simultaneously criticizing the antebellum and more recent South.”<sup>58</sup> According to Pannell, Randall could not. In his opinion, Pannell wrote in part that Randall’s use of recognizable characters, plots, and settings from Margaret Mitchell’s novel was not protected by the fair use defense. The key factor in his determination was the degree to which Alice Randall’s novel transforms the elements it incorporates from Mitchell’s work. Pannell acknowledged that “the structure and style of the new work differ dramatically from the epic qualities of *Gone With the Wind*” and that Randall’s novel “takes its new character Cynara on new adventures and creates new scenes with the older work’s characters, while it also revisits the older work’s scenes.” Judge Pannell found that “*The Wind Done Gone* contains transformative parody that criticizes the earlier work and the antebellum South in general,” but only to a qualified degree—“it does so no more than any other sequel to an original work.”<sup>59</sup> Adopting the plaintiff’s argument, Pannell determined that *The Wind Done Gone* functioned as a sequel. He also repeatedly referred to it as a sequel in his ruling. Rejecting the defendant’s fair use defense, he wrote that Randall “uses far more of the original than necessary.” In Pannell’s judgment, “Her use does not merely ‘conjure up’ the earlier work, but rather has made a wholesale encapsulation of the earlier work, copied its most famous and compelling fictional scenes and appropriated its copyrighted and most notable characters.” He added, “Her use of the copyrighted material merely summarizes most of the earlier work without commentary or fresh ideas that challenge

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<sup>58</sup> Charles A. Pannell, Jr., “Order issued April 20, 2001 Granting Plaintiff’s Motion for a Preliminary Injunction and Enjoining Defendant for the Further Production, Display, Distribution Advertising, Sale or Offer for Sale of *The Wind Done Gone*,” p. 33, *SunTrust Bank, v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Order\\_4\\_20\\_2001.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Order_4_20_2001.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

the readers understanding of the earlier work... the parodic intent may be [sic] substantial; the parodic effect, however, is slight in comparison [sic] to the extensive copying.”<sup>60</sup>

Pannell also specifically factored into his decision the contract for the “Second Sequel,” which, he acknowledged, was “expected to tell Rhett’s story.” Implying that Randall had also infringed on the “Second Sequel,” Pannell noted that Rhett’s story was one Randall “attempts to largely [sic] tell in *The Wind Done Gone*.”<sup>61</sup> He concluded, therefore, that whatever market harm *Gone With the Wind* might suffer as a result of Randall’s novel would not be due to the “effectiveness of its critical commentary,” but from its “market substitution as a sequel.”<sup>62</sup>

Though the injunction prevented the widespread distribution of *The Wind Done Gone*, some critics had already received review copies before the lawsuit was filed. Columnist Ellen Goodman could not fathom how anyone could read *The Wind Done Gone* and think that Randall had written a sequel rather than a parody. “It may not be a comedy,” Goodman wrote, “but Randall has written a story turning the world of Tara into Tata, creating and re-creating leading roles for former slaves.” Quoting a passage of Pannell’s ruling in which he referred to Mitchell’s “beloved characters and their romantic, but tragic, world,” Goodman demanded to know, “Whose beloved characters? Whose tragic world?” Underscoring the cultural influence of Mitchell’s novel, Goodman asserted, “*Gone With the Wind* rewrote antebellum and Reconstruction history into a myth of epic and classic proportions. Mitchell’s South was a place of happy slaves and white plantation owners struggling nobly to maintain their way of life.”<sup>63</sup> In an article for *Salon.com*, Laura Miller cited the same passage of the judge’s ruling to suggest that Pannell had inadvertently revealed a bias for the *Gone With the Wind*

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 40, 45.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>63</sup> Ellen Goodman, “Banned Book Mocks Margaret Mitchell’s Epic Antebellum, Reconstruction Myth,” *The Augusta (GA) Chronicle*, May 5, 2001, LexisNexis Academic.

mythology.<sup>64</sup> In other passages, Pannell seems to have missed the point of Randall's novel entirely. "Ms. Mitchell's vision of the South is but one fictional encapsulation of that time," Pannell wrote. Randall, he suggested, was free to write her own narrative about slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, but instead "copied Mitchell's vision, retold *Gone With the Wind*'s story and then provided a second sequel."<sup>65</sup> In response to the ruling, Alice Randall told one interviewer, "The right thing is standing up and acknowledging that I intended to write a parody, I wrote a parody and that I thought *Gone With the Wind*, the book—the novel—needed to be addressed. Not the South, not slavery, not history. The novel *Gone With the Wind* is my subject. The racism in *Gone With the Wind* is my subject. Not the racism in America."<sup>66</sup>

The 11th Circuit Court of Appeals overturned Pannell's ruling when the three-judge panel reached very different conclusions about the critical effect of Randall's novel and its status as parody. The circuit court vacated the injunction immediately after the May hearing and issued a full written opinion in October. In reversing the decision of the district court, the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit took into account the mythic status of *Gone With the Wind*; it also affirmed Randall's right to refer extensively to Mitchell's novel in order to criticize her portrayal of African Americans and slavery.

Earlier precedents warned that courts should not attempt to evaluate the artistic or humorous effect of a creative work; therefore, the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit determined to "treat a work as parody if its aim is to comment upon or criticize a prior work by appropriating elements of the original." By this definition, the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit found "the parodic character of the *TWDG* [*The Wind Done Gone*] is clear." According to the opinion authored by Judge Stanley Birch, "*TWDG* is not a general commentary upon the Civil-

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<sup>64</sup> Laura Miller, "Mammy's Revenge: 'The Wind Done Gone' Puts A Chokehold On Scarlett & Co., But The South's Infatuation With Its Past Will Never Die" *Salon.Com*, May 2, 2001, <http://www.salon.com/2001/05/02/wind/>.

<sup>65</sup> Pannell, "Order issued April 20, 2001," 28.

<sup>66</sup> Jill Vejnaska, "Ruling's 'Chilling' to Author of 'Wind,'" *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 24, 2001, LexisNexis Academic.

War-era American South, but a specific criticism of and rejoinder to the depiction of slavery and the relationships between blacks and whites in *GWTW*.”<sup>67</sup> He recognized that *The Wind Done Gone* is “principally and purposefully a critical statement that seeks to rebut and destroy the perspective, judgments, and mythology of *GWTW*.”<sup>68</sup> Judge Birch went on to discuss how Alice Randall transforms *Gone With the Wind* and Mitchell’s description of “how both blacks and whites were purportedly better off in the days of slavery”:

While told from a different perspective, more critically, the story is transformed into a very different tale... Cynara’s very language is a departure from Mitchell’s original prose; she acts as the voice of Randall’s inversion of *GWTW*. She is the vehicle of parody; she is its means-not its end. It is clear within the first fifty pages of Cynara’s fictional diary that Randall’s work flips *GWTW*’s traditional race roles, portrays powerful whites as stupid or feckless, and generally sets out to demystify *GWTW* and strip the romanticism from Mitchell’s specific account of this period of our history. Approximately the last half of *TWDG* tells a completely new story, that although involving characters based on *GWTW* characters, features plot elements found nowhere within the covers of *GWTW*. Where Randall refers directly to Mitchell’s plot and characters, she does so in service of her general attack on *GWTW*. In *GWTW*, Scarlett O’Hara often expresses disgust with and condescension towards blacks; in *TWDG* Other, Scarlett’s counterpart, is herself of mixed descent. ... In *TWDG*, nearly every black character is given some redeeming quality—whether depth, with cunning, beauty, strength, or courage that their *GWTW* analogues lacked. ...It is hard to imagine how Randall could have specifically criticized *GWTW* without depending heavily upon copyrighted elements of that book. A parody is a work that seeks to comment upon or criticize another work by appropriating elements of the original. ‘Parody needs to mimic an original to make its point and so has some claim to use the creation of its victim’s (or collective victims’) imagination. Thus, Randall has fully employed those conscripted elements from *GWTW* to make war against it.”<sup>69</sup>

In his concurring opinion, Judge Stanley Marcus reiterated the transformative nature of *The Wind Done Gone* and admonished that copyright cannot be used as a form of censorship. According to Marcus, “the district court erred finding that the critical or parodic element of *The Wind Done Gone* is anything but clear cut.” In Marcus’s view, Randall’s novel, “profoundly alters what it borrows—

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<sup>67</sup> Stanley Birch, “Comprehensive Opinion Vacating Preliminary Injunction, dated October 10, 2001,” pp. 26-27, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Court Papers*, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Comprehensive\\_Opinion.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Comprehensive_Opinion.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-32.

indeed, at times beyond recognition.” Marcus also stressed that “it is not copyright’s job to ‘protect the reputation’ of a work or guard it from ‘taint’ in any sense except an economic one—specifically, where substitution occurs,” which it did not in this case. The Supreme Court had already determined that a work’s derivative market included only those subsequent works a copyright holder would likely develop or license to another creator. Since copyright holders were not likely to approve “critical reviews or lampoons of their own productions,” such works are not considered part of the derivative market and are not subject to the original work’s copyright. Turning to Pat Conroy’s account, Judge Marcus addressed the history of the Mitchell Trusts’ prohibition of homosexuality and miscegenation in their licensed works:

The preliminary record does not indicate why SunTrust sought to impose editorial restrictions on Conroy. To the extent that SunTrust may have done so to preserve *Gone With the Wind*’s reputation, or protect its story from “taint,” however, it may not now invoke copyright to further that goal. Of course, SunTrust can choose to license its derivatives however it wishes and insist that those derivatives remain free of content it deems disreputable. SunTrust may be vigilant of *Gone With the Wind*’s public image—but it may not use copyright to shield *Gone With the Wind* from unwelcome comment, a policy that would extend intellectual property protection “into the precincts of censorship,” in Pat Conroy’s words. “Because the social good is served by increasing the supply of criticism—and thus, potentially, of truth—creators of original works cannot be given the power to block the dissemination of critical derivative works.” Leibovitz, 137 F.3d at 115 n. 3. “Copyright law is not designed to stifle critics. Destructive parodies play an important role in social and literary criticism and thus merit protection even though they may discourage or discredit an original author.” Fisher, 794 F.2d at 438 (citation and internal quotation marks omitted.) The law grants copyright holders a powerful monopoly in their expressive works. It should not also afford them windfall damages for the publication of the sorts of works that they themselves would never publish, or worse, grant them a power of indirect censorship.<sup>70</sup>

In short, the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit recognized the mythical status of *Gone With the Wind* and upheld Alice Randall’s right to parody the novel as a corrective to Mitchell’s injurious portrayal of African Americans and her benign portrait of slavery. The court’s conclusion that the Mitchell Trusts could not use copyright to insulate *Gone With the Wind* from “taint” or criticism also effectively meant that

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<sup>70</sup> Stanley Marcus, concurring opinion, “Comprehensive Opinion Vacating Preliminary Injunction, dated October 10, 2001,” pp. 47-61, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Court Papers*, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Comprehensive\\_Opinion.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Comprehensive_Opinion.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).



copyright could not be invoked to wield control over cultural memory. The circuit court referred the case back to the district court for further adjudication; but because the likelihood of SunTrust's success in the overall lawsuit was one of the factors the courts weighed when determining appropriateness of an injunction, the circuit court evaluated the plaintiff's evidence and determined that SunTrust was not likely to succeed on the merits. SunTrust and Houghton Mifflin settled out of court in May 2002.<sup>71</sup>

### **“A Story of Reading, Writing, and Redemption”**

As the copyright lawsuit proceeded through the courts, newspaper reviewers were polarized in their assessments of *The Wind Done Gone*. David Kipen of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, who offered one of the harshest reviews after only a “ cursory reading,” judged Randall “a writer of middling stylistic gifts and almost no narrative ones.” Kipen claimed, “Her novella doodles around in *Gone With the Wind*’s margins without ever attaining either the freestanding viability of a decent sequel or the focused cleverness of good parody.”<sup>72</sup> Michiko Kakutani, of *The New York Times*, wrote “Ms. Randall’s efforts at parody... are decidedly unfunny, and her attempts at social commentary (another area protected under copyright law) are often ungainly.” Kakutani asserted that the novel “ends up inadvertently diminishing the horrors and deprivations of slavery.” As for literary merit, *The New York Times* critic found Randall’s novel “A messy hodgepodge of styles and ambitions” that “veers wildly between satire and sentimentality, political rhetoric... and mushy dime-store melodrama.” She suggested that the copyright lawsuit had generated much more interest in *The Wind Done Gone* than

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<sup>71</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, “Mitchell Estate Settles ‘Gone With the Wind Suit,’ *The New York Times*, May 10, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/10/business/mitchell-estate-settles-gone-with-the-wind-suit.html>.

<sup>72</sup> David Kipen, “‘Done Gone’ Ain’t Good; Book Fails Both as Parody, Sequel” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 2, 2001, LexisNexis Academic.

the book would have produced on its own.<sup>73</sup> Cary Clack, of the *San Antonio Express-News*, applauded Randall's novel. "While never flinching from the horrors of slavery," Clack wrote, "*The Wind Done Gone* celebrates a people's emancipation not only from bondage but also from history and myth, custom and stereotype and the restrictions of who to love and when. In doing so, Randall also emancipates slaves from their simple-minded and cardboard depictions of yore and presents them as flesh and blood people using all of their gifts, wits and strengths to triumph over pain and degradation."<sup>74</sup> Cynthia Tucker, of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, wrote, "Though clever in places, Randall's book is not that funny"; yet echoing comments by Randall, Tucker declared, "the poisonous mythology of 'Gone With the Wind' richly deserves parody." Tucker acknowledged, "The broad acceptance of Mitchell's novel has lent her story the aura of actual social history. That means millions of readers take as realistic her superficial portrayals of steely Southern belles, dashing suitors/husbands, and, most of all, stupid but devoted slaves." Tucker averred that the lawsuit was not simply about the business interests of the Mitchell estate but rather "something far more precious to defenders of the Confederacy: preserving the Old South mythology that Mitchell creates." According to Tucker, "This mythology, so distant from actual history, cannot countenance the tortured South that William Faulkner so artfully and accurately portrays in his works. And it cannot tolerate Randall's parody, with its bitter, scheming slaves, homosexual planters, and, most of all, miscegenation between masters and slaves."<sup>75</sup>

When *The Wind Done Gone* became available for sale, readers found a novel in diurnal form that purports to be the intimate writings of Cynara, the bi-racial half-sister of Randall's counterpart to Scarlett O'Hara. According to its fictional backstory, this journal was found among the effects of an

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<sup>73</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "Within Its Genre, A Takeoff on Tara Gropes for a Place," Critic's Notebook, *The New York Times*, May 5, 2001, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>74</sup> Cary Clack, "'Wind' Blows Away Soft-Focus Mythos Of Slavery; Legal Flaps Shouldn't Obscure Book's Literary Value," *San Antonio (TX) Express-News*, May 13, 2001, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>75</sup> Cynthia Tucker, "'GWTW' Richly Deserves Parody by Black Writer; Our Opinion," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 27, 2001.

elderly African American woman, who resided in an assisted living facility near Atlanta. Though she otherwise enjoyed robust health, medical records reveal the custodian of the diary was twice hospitalized for “severe emotional collapse,” first in July 1936—a date that corresponds to the publication of Margaret Mitchell’s novel—and again on New Year’s Day, 1940, roughly two weeks after the Atlanta premiere of David O. Selznick’s motion picture.<sup>76</sup> Suggesting a trauma inflicted by Mitchell’s narrative, each public debut of *Gone With the Wind* seems to have triggered an episode of acute psychological distress for the descendent of slaves who inherited a story very much at odds with the famous book and film. The woman’s inability to find a publisher for the diary essentially left unrefuted the international bestseller and cinematic blockbuster, which cast the Civil War as an apocalypse for the planter class. Though the textual note does not say so, the uncanny timing of the diary’s discovery in the early 1990s also coincided with the publication of Alexandra Ripley’s sequel *Scarlett* and a new swell of real-world popularity for Scarlett O’Hara’s story.<sup>77</sup> The textual note that relays the history of the diary does not clarify whether it was located posthumously among its owner’s possessions or whether the continuation and resurgence of *Gone With the Wind* prompted her to produce the record in hopes that the counternarrative might finally find an audience. Whatever the case, the diary came to light in Randall’s fictional world just when *Scarlett* seemed once and for all to deliver the Rhett-Scarlett reconciliation that Mitchell had denied her readers. At the same time, the public was also expressing renewed interest in the Civil War, following the broadcast of Ken Burns’s PBS documentary.

Only in the postscript to *The Wind Done Gone* does Alice Randall reveal the ancestry of the

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<sup>76</sup> Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone: A Novel* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), v. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *TWDG*.

<sup>77</sup> Alice Randall stated in court documents that she had never read *Scarlett* and that her parody was limited to the original *Gone With the Wind* novel; Randall, “Declaration of Alice Randall,” 7. Randall does not expressly conjure Ripley’s sequel in her textual note, but as the author of *The Wind Done Gone* does incorporate the earlier publication and film premiere into the story of the diary’s provenance, it is worth noting that the diary was discovered during a period of heightened interest in *Gone With the Wind* that resulted from the publication of its much anticipated, if critically maligned, first sequel.

woman to whom the diary last belonged and how it came into her possession. The author of the diary, Cynara, bequeathed the document to an acquaintance who also appeared in its pages. That person passed it to her eldest daughter, who passed it to her only daughter, who was named for both the diarist and the maternal grandmother: Prissy Cynara Brown.<sup>78</sup> The line of inheritance Randall imagines is consistent with the narrative's emphasis on mother-daughter relationships, but it is especially fitting that the counter-story should be preserved by the descendants of *Gone With the Wind*'s most ignominious black character. Called Miss Priss in *The Wind Done Gone*, her counterpart in Mitchell's novel is the slave Prissy, the character who, when she appeared on-screen in the film version, made a young Malcom X—the only black patron in the theater—feel like “crawling under the rug.”<sup>79</sup> For Randall, characters like Prissy and Mammy embodied *Gone With the Wind*'s mimetic violence against black people. The narrative refers to these characters in dehumanizing language and, says Randall, “every time they speak, it is an inarticulate opaque dialect that is incomprehensible, suggesting intellectual inferiority to the point of intellectual void.”<sup>80</sup> As part of its recasting of *Gone With the Wind*, Randall's novel reveals Miss Priss's foolish behavior as a carefully crafted persona, a form of defiance that masks the rage of a woman who lost two brothers to the white family who once owned them.

Most of the characters of *The Wind Done Gone* are identifiable to anyone familiar with Mitchell's narrative, but Randall's characters ultimately overturn what audiences have come to know of their *GWTW* counterparts and of that earlier narrative. Pork, the loyal valet, returns as the more pungently named Garlic and the mastermind of Planter's (Gerald's) estate. Melanie Wilkes's

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<sup>78</sup> Conflating the diary's author with her namesake, some court documents incorrectly suggested the diarist was the resident of the assisted living facility who had been hospitalized after the novel and film debut. To have survived to the 1990s would have made the diarist Cynara at least 145 years old.

<sup>79</sup> Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 38.

<sup>80</sup> Randall and Olshan, “The Wind Done Gone and Finn: A Novel,” video recording of “Retelling our Myths for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

counterpart, Mealy Mouth, is no model of gentility but the woman who orders Miss Priss's brother whipped to death for telling what she had deemed unspeakable about Dreamy Gentleman's sexual exploits with male slaves. In Randall's novel, Mealy Mouth did not die in childbirth as everyone thought but at the hand of clever Miss Priss, who blamed her for the deaths of the elder brother and the baby who starved so that Mrs. Garlic could nurse "Dreamy Gentleman's Harvard-going brat" (*TWDG*, 44). In order to demonstrate how the white infant supplants Mrs. Garlic's own child, Randall conjures the episode from *Gone With the Wind* in which Dilcey nurses Beau Wilkes. In Randall's version, that displacement has fatal consequences for the black baby.

As the novel told from Scarlett's perspective never mentions a slave sibling, the pen of that half-sister inverts Mitchell's notions of racial difference, referring to the Scarlett figure only as Other. Randall explains this appellation as a "subset of the word 'mother,'" which alludes to Other's role in the mother-daughter relationship of Mammy and Cynara. The novelist also notes the use of the term to "suggest the rejected social identity of black people as being 'the other' in society." The term also refers to the "rejected self" of feminist criticism, as in the "mad woman in the attic" epitomized by Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre*.<sup>81</sup> In fact *The Wind Done Gone* owes much to Jean Rhys's retelling of the madwoman's story in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which Randall says prompted her to rethink her assumptions about Charlotte Brontë's text.<sup>82</sup>

*The Wind Done Gone* assaults *Gone With the Wind* and its representation of black characters on three fronts. First, Randall refutes the myth of African American intellectual inferiority with a central character who may be the only example in American fiction of a black woman who is also

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<sup>81</sup> Gross and Randall, "Songwriter And Novelist Alice Randall Talks About Her New Book 'The Wind Done Gone' and About Her Family and Career."

<sup>82</sup> "A Conversation with Alice Randall," in *A Reader's Guide: The Wind Done Gone*.

“significantly a reader.”<sup>83</sup> This absence, Randall notes, is antithetical to the generations of black women in the segregated South who “did nothing but read” because they were denied access to other entertainment venues like movie theaters and restaurants.<sup>84</sup> Randall challenges the “Mammy” stereotype by making her central character the biological child of a slave woman who was compelled to care for her master and mistress’s children, to the point of neglecting her own. As Cynara and Other are both Planter’s daughters, that filial relation starkly highlights the arbitrary notions of race that separate the two sisters and that Randall dispels with the revelation of Other’s black ancestor. In the first half of the novel, Randall demonstrates that the trauma of slavery for Cynara is familial alienation—the result of her and her mother’s enslavement as well as ideologies of racial difference that underpin their slaveholding society. As the child sold away by her father, Cynara’s story also reprises and revises, from the perspective of the discarded child, the filial denial at the center of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, the contemporary counternarrative first published within months of *Gone With the Wind*. Finally, Randall portrays the politics of Reconstruction through Cynara’s two accomplished black suitors, the childhood friend Jeems and Congressman Adam Conyers.<sup>85</sup>

In writing *The Wind Done Gone*, Alice Randall drew from a range of literary sources, including slave narratives; novels like *Moll Flanders*, *Sentimental Journey*, and *Clarissa*; the romance between Janie and Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; and nineteenth century diaries by white women, including Mary Chesnut.<sup>86</sup> A Harvard graduate who wrote her senior thesis on mother-daughter relationships in the novels of Jane Austen, Randall also suggests *Sense and Sensibility* as one

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<sup>83</sup> Randall and Olshan, “The Wind Done Gone and Finn: A Novel,” video recording of “Retelling our Myths for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> “A Conversation with Alice Randall,” in *A Reader’s Guide: The Wind Done Gone*.

of the novel's influences, but on that point, Randall and her heroine disagree. Cynara says the only Jane Austen novel she ever loved was *Mansfield Park* because "Fanny hated slavers" (TWDG, 157). Aside from the episodes she conjures from *Gone With the Wind*, Cynara makes literary allusions to the tragedies of Shakespeare, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and the most influential 19<sup>th</sup> century works on slavery. Randall, also a country songwriter whose best known musical work is the 1990s hit "XXX's and OOO's: An American Girl" hopes her readers can hear "the rhythms of country blues in Cynara's prose," which grows more sophisticated as the novel progresses.<sup>87</sup>

Alice Randall describes *The Wind Done Gone* as "a story of reading, writing, and redemption, the story of a woman, a black woman, who reads her way into writing and writes her way into redemption."<sup>88</sup> The story begins on Cynara's twenty-eighth birthday. Save for a white frosted tiered cake, Cynara pronounces the diary and accompanying pen her best birthday presents. Along with a pair of emerald earbobs, the authenticity of which she doubts, the diary and pen are gifts from R., who first taught Cynara to read in bed. Like the relationship that facilitated but also eroticized her education, Cynara's literacy is the source of much ambivalence. Evoking filth and abject discomfort, she writes, "It's a pissed bed on a cold night to read words on paper saying your name and price, to read the letters that say you are owned, or to read words that say this one or that one will pay so much money for you to be recaptured." Literacy, in Cynara's early estimation is a cruel and demoralizing skill. "After some of the things I've read," she asserts, "I know if God had loved me, I'd a been born blind." Fifteen diary entries later, Cynara again relates "words on paper" to the power to enslave, as she recalls her name and price written on a bill of sale at the Charleston slave market. She considers Beauty's prostitutes more fortunate for being "saved the pain of words on paper; their prices disappear, spoken and forgotten in the air" (TWDG, 77). Yet as Cynara eventually reads the correspondence of Lady and

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<sup>87</sup> "About the Author" and "A Conversation with Alice Randall," *A Reader's Guide: The Wind Done Gone*.

<sup>88</sup> "A Conversation with Alice Randall," *A Reader's Guide: The Wind Done Gone*.

Feelepe and a letter dictated by her mother, and as she also writes and rereads her diary, literacy becomes the single most important vehicle of Cynara's personal liberation. In her sixth entry, Cynara declares, "This is my book. If I die tomorrow, nobody'll remember me except maybe somebody who find this book" (*TWDG*, 7). Readers, thus, witness the preliminary stages of a process Randall explains as the diarist "invent[ing] herself out of her language," of Cynara, "read[ing] and writ[ing] her way into being."<sup>89</sup>

If creating a literate heroine and showing her evolution as a writer is Randall's strategy for debunking the myth of intellectual inferiority, Cynara sees journaling as an opportunity to create an accurate record of her experience, one that resembles nothing else in literature. Having read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she concludes, "I didn't see me in it." The narrative of slavery against which Margaret Mitchell most directly defined *Gone With the Wind* represents nothing of Cynara's experience. Cynara judges Uncle Tom to have been "Jesus in costume" and asserts "I don't want to go in disguise. I don't want to write no novel. I'm just afraid of forgetting." Anticipating her refusal to "pass" as white and the narrative tensions between cognitive, traumatic, and cultural memory, Cynara also declares her authorial intentions: "I'm going to write down everything. Something like Mr. Frederick Douglass" (*TWDG*, 7). The evocation of Douglass as Cynara's authorial role model prefigures an actual meeting when the fictional diarist attends a Washington reception hosted by the Radical Abolitionist, orator, and diplomat. In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855, Douglass recounts how his early readings in the *Columbian Orator* awakened him to the true nature of slavery but left him with no visible means of obtaining his freedom. Douglass writes that at the time he was "wretched and gloomy, beyond [his] ability to describe" and claims to have envied his unenlightened

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<sup>89</sup> Randall and Olshan, "The Wind Done Gone and Finn: A Novel," video recording of "Retelling our Myths for the 21st Century."



fellow slaves.<sup>90</sup> Cynara echoes that sentiment when she recalls her bill of sale and concludes, “The most free slaves are the ones who cannot read write (*TWDG*, 77). After his self-liberation from bondage, however, Douglass’s mastery of words became his most important weapon against slavery. He penned multiple autobiographies that both denounced the institution and established Douglass as the country’s preeminent black intellectual. Though Cynara is legally a free woman when *The Wind Done Gone* opens in 1873, her psychological experience of slavery, the natal alienation and familial betrayals remain unresolved. As she writes her diary, Cynara transforms herself from a chattel object about whom others write in documents that enslave into a subjective, authorial agent who, in the process of writing and revising her life story, works through her enslaved past.

Alice Randall chose to tell Cynara’s story in the first-person because she “did not want [her] character to be a slave to anyone,” including the novelist. Randall wanted Cynara to “invent herself out of her language.”<sup>91</sup> In her initial diary entries, Cynara adheres to the conventions of antebellum slave narratives. She provides a brief account of her parentage and place of birth but then quickly diverges from the textual formula that literary scholar James Olney found common among antebellum slave narratives and suggested as an “enslaved” literary form.<sup>92</sup> Cynara vaguely summarizes her childhood on a “cotton farm,” a brief period of “shawl-fetch slavery” in Charleston, a “bare-breasted hour on an auction block”; “drudge slavery” as a brothel maid; “concubinage”; and a European Tour that, R. later reveals, was intended as a jest. Yet Cynara equates this synopsis with her traumatic memory of the auction block and suggests the autobiographical outline as the narrative equivalent of that dehumanizing hour: “If I strip the flesh off my bones, like they stripped the clothes off my flesh in the

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<sup>90</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, with introduction and notes by John Stauffer (1855; repr., New York: Random House, 2003), 84.

<sup>91</sup> Randall and Olshan, “The Wind Done Gone and Finn: A Novel,” video recording of “Retelling our Myths for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

<sup>92</sup> James Olney, “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature,” in *The Slave’s Narrative*, eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 148.

slave market down near the battery in Charleston, this would be my skeleton” (*TWDG*, 2).

By constructing the novel as a fictional diary, Randall allows Cynara the authorial autonomy to tell her own story, but in a genre of life writing that differs from a traditional autobiography. As editor Margo Culley explains in her introduction to *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women*, “While the novel and autobiography may be thought of as artistic wholes, the diary is always in process, always in some sense a fragment.”<sup>93</sup> Where most writers and oral storytellers relay their narratives with foreknowledge of “what happens next,” the diarist writes in a perpetual present, where the plot is “a series of surprises to writer and reader alike.”<sup>94</sup> This feature of the diurnal form finds Cynara constantly engaged in acts of revision. As she recalls the trauma of her enslavement, she also acquires and assimilates new information into her life narrative, often altering her understanding of the past and her sense of selfhood. Diary writing, like modern psychoanalysis, Culley notes, can facilitate a “dialogue with aspects of the self” that is “capable of unlocking mysteries of the human psyche and becoming the occasion of profound knowledge, growth, and change.”<sup>95</sup> Culley also suggests two metaphors for the process of diary writing that Randall literalizes in the pages of *The Wind Done Gone*. The first is the psychoanalytic function of the diary as mirror; while Cynara records multiple instances of examining her reflection, the looking glass is crucial to Cynara’s language of trauma. Second, Culley proposes that “we might think of all diaries as travel diaries and the overriding metaphor of all journals as the journey, a journey from one ‘place’ in time to another.”<sup>96</sup> In the course of the novel, Cynara travels back and forth between Atlanta, Cotton Farm, and Washington, D.C; she considers but ultimately declines to repeat an earlier trip abroad; and she recalls her former enslavement as a series of

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<sup>93</sup> Margo Culley, introduction to *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present*, ed. Margo Culley (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1985), 19.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

relocations from one owner's household to another. In one sense, Cynara's story is a series of geographic moves that signal her more important intellectual, psychological, and emotional journey.

In Cynara's recollection of slavery, the deepest source of psychic pain is her alienation from her mother. Cynara's authorial example Frederick Douglass wrote of the "terrible interference of slavery," which diverted familial affections from their "natural course" and made strangers of siblings, parents and children.<sup>97</sup> Douglass, who was separated from his mother in infancy and only met her a handful of times, reported in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that he had to "learn the value of [his] mother long after her death, and by witnessing the devotion of other mothers to their children."<sup>98</sup> Though Cynara lived in the same household as her mother until she was thirteen, Douglass's account of how slavery estranges families, particularly mothers and children, presciently describes Cynara's complex relationship with the woman she blames for her exile and for a lifetime of feeling unloved. Cynara spends much of her youth watching and coveting the devotion her mother bestows on Other but denies Cynara. As the mother nears death, the daughter is uncertain whether she can accommodate the last request to be at her parent's side. Believing her mother exercised the final consent when Planter sent her away, Cynara holds her dying parent responsible for the most traumatic experiences of her life. For Cynara, the slave market epitomizes familial, particularly maternal, betrayal. According to Cynara, "I have never forgiven Mammy for the hours I stood bare-breasted in the market in Charleston. I don't know how to forgive her and love myself" (*TWDG* 4, 31). Yet at other times, it pains Cynara to recall the indignities her mother suffered under the slave regime, a suffering epitomized by the appellation "Mammy." Everyone called her "Mammy" as if she were not important enough or, in her daughter's words, "big enough to have a name" (*TWDG*, 6). Evoking an insulting descriptor Mitchell applies in *Gone With the Wind*, the diarist of *The Wind Done Gone* records how the white planters likened her

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<sup>97</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 15.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

mother's physical size to that of an elephant and reframes that ridicule as part of their systematic dehumanization of her mother.

The earliest memory Cynara recounts, witnessing three-year-old Other demand to nurse at her mother's breast, illustrates both the objectification of "Mammy" and the expectation that she must accommodate her white charge over her biological child. Watching her mother and half-sister, the diarist recalls, "I ached in some place I didn't know I had, where my heart should have been but wasn't. I have come to believe that was the very first time I ever felt my soul, and it was having a spasm" (*TWDG*, 13). As Cynara writes of her master-father watching "his daughter taking pleasure where he himself had done," the scene encapsulates the dual exploitation of the enslaved woman's body (*TWDG*, 14). Just as Mrs. Garlic is expected to place the needs of Mealy Mouth's baby before those of her child who starves, "Mammy" is also expected to nourish her master's child from her own body. In a subsequent entry, as Cynara recounts the history of Cotton Farm, she suggests the death of Mrs. Garlic's baby and even her own conception as part of a common practice that ensured sustenance for white infants but made black babies expendable. Of Mammy and Lady's simultaneous pregnancies, Cynara writes, "It was a way of making sure there was milk for the [mistress's] baby. Somebody plants a seed in the going-to-be-wet-nurse, and then you starve that child if you have to, like they starved Miss Priss's younger brother" (*TWDG*, 50). As she describes Planter's approval at the sight of Other breastfeeding, the sexual relationship between master and slave compounds the exploitation of "Mammy" represented in the scene. In *Gone With the Wind*, hunger, specifically Scarlett's hunger, is synonymous with the dispossession of the planter class. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Other's hunger represents the authority that even the master's toddler wields over "Mammy." For Cynara, who was not physically starved but deprived of motherly affection, the scene epitomizes her notion of Other as the parental usurper and herself as the discarded child.

As her dying mother's summons stirs old memories and conflicting emotions, Cynara's

admission that “Even though she let me go, I miss her” expresses the diarist’s longing for the maternal affection she never felt but watched her mother lavish on Other. Reminiscent of a scene in *Jubilee* in which Vyry watches the styling of her half-sister’s hair and asks for curls of her own, only to be told, “niggers don’t have curls,” Cynara recalls her mother brushing Other’s hair into curls, a service she apparently never performed for Cynra. Where her mother addressed Other affectionately as “Lamb,” Cynara was simply, “Chile” (*TWDG*, 5). Amid these recollections, Cynara delays and debates a visit to Cotton Farm, hoping she might receive word of her mother’s improvement and, thus, a reprieve from returning to the place where she was born into slavery but unwanted by her closest kin.

During her days of indecision, nightmares about her enslaved past plague Cynara. After one that begins with her as a child serving in the dining room, she wakes screaming. In another, Cynara carries a huge bag of rice. In *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett’s recurring nightmare of being cold, hungry, terrified, and lost in a thick fog embodies her desperate, elusive search for security after the Civil War. The part of the dream in which she finds herself “suddenly...running, running through the mist like a mad thing” comes to fruition in the moments after Melanie Wilkes’s death as Scarlett races home through the fog to declare too late her love for Rhett.<sup>99</sup> In *The Wind Done Gone*, Cynara’s recurring dream encapsulates her trauma of enslavement. She imagines herself as a girl, “sent to market with a heavy load of rice.” She panics when she notices that some of the rice has seeped out and left a trail behind her. After stopping to retie her bundle, which contains other items, she discovers that the bundle is lighter and intentionally begins to jettison its contents. Knowing she will be punished, she always awakens before she reaches her destination. Sometimes she stops to inspect her load for something worth saving but finds nothing that is also small enough to carry (*TWDG*, 32). Cynara’s dream imagery and the language in which she describes it evoke one of the working titles for Mitchell’s novel, “Tote the Weary Load,” taken from the “carry-me back” tune “My Old Kentucky Home.” In the song,

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<sup>99</sup> Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*, 475.

composed by Stephen Foster, the “weary load” refers to the burdens of slave life, particularly for bondpeople who had been sold South. The song belongs to a genre that romanticizes slaves’ affection for their masters, but the recurrence of the partial lyric “Just a few more days for to tote the weary load,” in *Gone With the Wind* stands not for slave suffering but the trials of Scarlett O’Hara, as she struggles to lift herself and her family out of their postwar poverty. Scarlet’s “weary load” is a direct result of the Confederate military loss and slaveholders’ dispossession of human property. Thus, the lyric that originally conveyed the hardships of slave life is speciously transformed by Mitchell to stand for the burden born by Scarlett and her ex-slaveholding class as a result of emancipation. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Cynara, who was sold away by her own father, dreams a dream that likewise represents her most traumatic experience. Cynara’s dream places the heavy load squarely on the shoulders of the former bondswoman and acknowledges the slave suffering that Mitchell’s text denies. In Cynara’s dream, her burden manifests as a heavy bundle of a cash crop, a load that evokes the physical demands of slave labor yet also symbolizes the psychological burden of slavery. In the version she dreams as she contemplates a visit to her dying mother, Cynara collects the burdens of which she has relieved herself and returns to where she started. She eventually literalizes that dream in her waking hours by travelling to Cotton Farm, presumably for the first time since her sale fifteen years earlier. The sight of the place nearly takes her breath away as she sees it “rising from the mists” (*TWDG*, 37).

When Cynara returns to Cotton Farm, she carries with her a copy of the letter Planter wrote to the man to whom he sold thirteen-year old Cynara for a dollar. Cynara couldn’t read at the time but copied the letter and kept it with her until she could decipher its meaning. Planter’s introductory remarks express his expectations for the recipient’s prosperity, given that the acquaintance, Thomas, will reap the profits of a rice and a cotton crop, provided that malaria does not strike, as it does some years, “leaving whole acres of slaves dead in the swamps” (*TWDG*, 36). Though Cynara expresses uncertainty about the meaning of her recurring dream and the most recent version in which she retraces

her path to the place where she started, the circularity of departure and return associated with Planter's letter, along with his introductory remarks, suggest his missive as the source for Cynara's dream imagery. The letter also explains how rice becomes the unconscious symbol of enslavement and psychic trauma for a woman born on a cotton plantation.

After establishing their shared sympathies over a common impediment to Thomas's "fine profit," and citing the first example of the novel's recurring disease trope, Planter turns to the business at hand. "I have a fancy girl I want to settle on you," he tells Thomas (*TWDG*, 36). Writing of a "delicate situation" and the girl's interference with her mother's work, Planter confides that his eldest daughter "adores her Mammy" but begins to "find her Mammy's daughter tiresome." Planter claims a "certain concern for this child," and implies a biological relation when he notes Cynara's resemblance to his own mother. He asks that Thomas take the girl he calls "Cindy" as a lady's maid and suggests that she be the father's wedding gift when Thomas's son marries. Reiterating the expectation of sexual servitude suggested by the term "fancy girl," Planter declares his confidence that Thomas's son will "manage the thing right." Essentially proposing that the buyer's son replicate the sexual politics of Planter's own household and that Cynara assume her mother's role of concubine and nurse, Planter proclaims that "in her day to come, Cindy will be a trusted Mammy." Planter concludes by offering to return the current favor by taking Thomas's slave children or those of Thomas's son into his own household. "In particular," writes Planter, "I wouldn't mind settling a little of your eldest son's property (the progeny of my girl) on my place if it's a convenience to you" (*TWDG*, 37).

Carrying that letter, Cynara arrives too late to see her mother, who died two hours earlier. Cynara learns that her mother expected her until the very end and that waiting for her daughter's return kept Mammy alive. She died believing that Cynara had arrived, but it was only Miss Priss in one of Other's cast-off dresses. When Other enters the room where Mammy is laid out and begins to confess her grief, she does not notice Cynara, hidden by a highback chair. As the diarist repeats for emphasis

“She didn’t see me at all. Not Other,” she suggests a feeling of invisibility that characterizes her relation to Other. During the funeral service, Cynara notes, “Other didn’t see me at all; it was if I didn’t exist” (*TWDG*, 53). Afterward, Other, is “awarded pride of place at the head of the line of mourners,” with Cynara following immediately behind her. In a funeral procession that literalizes the former mistress’s displacement of the biological daughter, Other takes the opportunity to reprimand Cynara, “You should be ashamed of neglecting Mammy” (*TWDG*, 54).

Between her late arrival and the burial, the diarist writes that of all the things she desired that belonged to Other, she never wanted anything “as much as I wanted her love for Mammy.” According to Cynara, “it don’t hurt near as much that Mammy didn’t love me as it hurts that I didn’t love Mammy” (*TWDG*, 42). In what follows, Cynara tells her family story, with a mythical beginning and a tragic end: “Once upon a time I loved my mother. But that love was frail and untended; I let that love die” (*TWDG*, 42). On second thought, she decides that what happened is more aptly compared to a sickness, “like the smallpox moving through the house, leaving scars and death...” (*TWDG*, 43). What likely prompts this comparison is her statement, at the beginning of the same entry, that Garlic’s family now occupies the old overseer’s house, “where Lady caught some fever, smallpox, or scarlet, and died” (*TWDG*, 42). In *Gone With the Wind*, Ellen O’Hara dies of typhoid after caring for the overseer’s mistress Emmie Slattery. Relaying the story of Ellen’s death, Mitchell’s Mammy suggests the disease as an infectious class-based contagion. Her remarks preface a social reorganization that finds Slattery respectably married to Jonas Wilkerson and the newly prosperous couple scheming to seize ownership of Tara. In the diary entry that recounts Lady’s demise, Alice Randall reimagines the typhoid fatality by having Cynara suggest a possible cause of death—scarlet fever—that is homonymous with Other’s *Gone With the Wind* counterpart.<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, though, smallpox, with its presentation of disfiguring

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<sup>100</sup> John E. Sitter, “Supplemental Declaration of John E. Sitter,” p. 12, *SunTrust Bank, v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Supplemental\\_John\\_Sitter.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Supplemental_John_Sitter.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).



scars and its eventual role in Other's death, emerges as the passage's dominant disease metaphor. In *The Wind Done Gone*, smallpox stands for slavery's effect on filial affection, encapsulated in Cynara's admission about her mother: "It hurts not to love her. And it hurt more when I didn't—I still don't—believe she ever loved me" (*TWDG*, 43).

Just as the longing to see Cynara contradicts the daughter's notion of her mother's cruel indifference, other revelations begin to change Cynara's knowledge of her mother and the power behind Cotton Farm. The two funerals—one held by Garlic and his immediate family in the morning and the "official" afternoon service attended by Other and Dreamy Gentleman—demonstrate the dual identities of Cynara's mother. Garlic's eulogy at the morning service reveals that he was the true mastermind of Tata and Cynara's mother was his collaborator. Garlic tells how he made sure Planter would win him in a poker game by mixing strong drinks for his old master, how he pulled the same trick with Planter's knowledge to acquire the land that is now Cotton Farm, and how he built the house, Tata, from his memory of great plantation houses he had seen. Garlic says the woman he called "Sister" understood the house he built was for the slaves, that it "stood proud and tall when we couldn't," and that it was "a monument to the slaves and the whips our bodies had received" (*TWDG*, 52). He says that together with Miss Priss, he and Cynara's mother constituted the real power of Tata and "kept this place together because it was ours" (*TWDG*, 52). By contrast, at the afternoon service, Dreamy Gentleman eulogizes the deceased as the stereotypical Mammy figure. Cynara gives the following account: "Dreamy Gentleman read properly from the Book of Common Prayer and gave a little talk about how we were laying to rest the last of a vanished species and culture—the loyal servant who, Christ-like, sacrificed herself for others. He believed every word. He believed my mother to be an unselfish woman. He believed her to be a loving beast of burden without sex or resentment. He knew nothing of her at all" (*TWDG*, 53).

Further revelations by Garlic reveal how little even Cynara knew of the mother forced to play

the role of Mammy. During their late-night talk, Cynara learns her mother's real name, which she writes three times in her diary, as if to comprehend by repetition what had so long eluded her: "Pallas. My mother's name is Pallas. Not Mammy. Pallas." She also learns how Pallas and Garlic engineered the marriage of Planter and Lady, who was still grieving for Feleepe, the dead cousin Lady loved. Though Garlic says Pallas felt sorry for Lady's loss, she also recognized that the young mistress's marriage to a man with no family, who lived on an isolated plantation, presented an opportunity that otherwise would not have been available to her: "Pallas could run the place, and she'd be free, free as she was going to be" (*TWDG*, 60). In *Gone With the Wind*, the marriage of Scarlett's parents is regarded by the Robillards as a "mésalliance" and the mother, whom Scarlett, as a child, confuses the Virgin Mary, speaks of Philippe just before her death. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Randall imagines the unlikely marriage of Planter and Lady to have been manipulated by their slaves. Pallas regularly drugs Lady to make her go through with the wedding and to ensure that she is unconscious during sexual intercourse. As an expert for the defense in the copyright case, Emory University professor John E. Sitter cited this instance as "an irreverent joke about Lady's sexual obliviousness" as she came to think of her children as the products of "immaculate conception" (*TWDG*, 61).<sup>101</sup> Early in *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett expresses a general view of marital sex as something men "forced" upon their wives, after discovering Rhett's connection to the woman she calls "that vile Watling creature."<sup>102</sup> Alice Randall criticizes the sexual politics of Mitchell's novel by imagining Other to be the child of marital rape. Randall leaves nothing ambiguous about these encounters, during which Lady is sedated by Mammy, who is also Planter's concubine. Here, too, Garlic reveals that the three O'Hara sons who died in infancy did so not from natural causes but from Pallas's determination to protect the slaves

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<sup>101</sup> John E. Sitter, "Declaration of John E. Sitter," p.5, *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* Court Papers, [http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall\\_url/pdf/Declaration\\_John\\_Sitter.pdf](http://www.hmhbooks.com/features/randall_url/pdf/Declaration_John_Sitter.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>102</sup> Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*, 250.

from the authority of a sober master. Cynara is unsure whether she wants the story to be true but feels that if Pallas did kill those babies, she, Cynara, would know for sure that her mother loved her. The most important revelation is Garlic's reply when Cynara asks what her mother said when she learned Cynara had been sold. When Planer sent their daughter away, Pallas did not know anything about it. The words "she didn't know" mean more to Cynara than "I love you" (*TWDG*, 63).

As Cynara begins to revise her notions of the power structure at Cotton Farm and her understanding of her mother, news of her half-sibling's demise evokes memories of her adolescence and of the changes in the household leading up to Cynara's sale. By the diarist's account, Other contracts smallpox, drinks too much, and falls down the stairs to her death, apparently from the shock of looking in the mirror. With R. away at his estranged wife's funeral, Cynara recalls the time when Lady began to withdraw her affection and when Other, who had begun to pull away from Mammy, grew close to Lady. That displacement permanently altered Cynara's experience. For most of Cynara's contemporaries, who "talk about before the war and after the war," the Civil War is the watershed moment of their lives. For Cynara, that divide happened much earlier, with Other's detachment from Pallas. "There came a time," writes Cynara, "when other was moving beyond Mammy, and that cleaved our world" (*TWDG*, 99). Where *Gone With the Wind* treats the Civil War as the impetus for the social reorganization it considers traumatic for slaveholders, Cynara suggests a different sort of upheaval in the realignment of loyalties at Tata. That turmoil ultimately leads to Cynara's sale and the hours spent in the Charleston slave market. In this period of their adolescence, other children of the planter class who had outgrown Pallas's discipline began to exert authority over her, demanding their baths drawn, clothes pressed, and hair styled. "Without thought or malice," writes Cynara, "they ordered Mammy to perform these services." As Cynara and Other watched, she writes, "it wounded us both, but it hurt her more." Having watched Other order Pallas around all her life, Cynara was accustomed to seeing her mother suffer those indignities (*TWDG*, 99). Other felt powerless to protect

Mammy from her peers, then “hated Mammy for being hurt” (*TGWD*, 100). Suggesting the same psychology at work between her parents and herself, the diarist reflects, “When you can’t protect a thing you love, it’s natural to come to hate that thing a little bit more each and every time it’s injured. Even if that thing is your daughter’s body” (*TWDG*, 100). Finally, according to Cynara, Other grew “sick to death of all that hating” and reconciled herself to the lie that Mammy’s indignities were not so terrible, after which, “she forgave herself, she forgave the other little white girls who formed her circle of visitors, and she forgave Mammy” (*TWDG*, 100). While Other distanced herself from Mammy, she drew closer to Lady, who until then had served, in Randall’s words, as Cynara’s “emotional mother.”<sup>103</sup> “As they discovered each other,” writes Cynara, once again evoking sickness, “I discovered the higher temperatures of jealousy. The fever comes in different degrees” (*TWDG*, 102). As she recalls the changes in household alliances, Cynara acknowledges for the first time a fact of life for the slave woman cast in the role of the Mammy, “the possibility that Mammy did for [Other] not because she wanted to, but because she had to” (*TWDG*, 103). Cynara realizes that, “Maybe Mammy loved her and maybe Mammy didn’t. Slavery made it impossible for Other to know. ‘She who ain’t free not to love, ain’t free to love’” (*TWDG*, 103).

## Letters

While Planter’s letter and her bill of sale represent Cynara’s enslavement, the letters composed by the two maternal figures Lady and Pallas are, next to the diary itself, the novel’s most liberating documents. For juvenile Cynara, Lady was a refuge, a maternal substitute for the woman who bore her but did not love her, or so the child believed. The bundle of letters R. calls Cynara’s “manumission

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<sup>103</sup> Gross and Randall, “Songwriter And Novelist Alice Randall Talks About Her New Book ‘The Wind Done Gone’ and About Her Family and Career.”

papers” contains the correspondence between Lady and her cousin Feleepe. In *Gone With the Wind*, Ellen Robillard married Gerald O’Hara after her family opposed a match with her cousin Philippe. Mitchell’s vague explanation for the thwarted union was that the Robillards considered the cousin rather “wild” and urged his travels west, which ultimately separated the lovers.<sup>104</sup> Ellen’s subsequent marriage to a man twenty-eight years her senior, who lacked genteel family roots, was regarded as a *mésalliance* by the Robillards and stands in Mitchell’s novel as one of several ill-conceived unions, a fact reiterated by Ellen’s deathbed cries for the lost Philippe. In Randall’s novel, the objection to Lady and Feleepe’s marriage is explained by a closely guarded family secret. When Lady writes to Feleepe that her mother cries constantly and claims “the curse of Haiti is upon us,” he speculates that their great grandmother was a murderer: “Did she kill a hundred slaves because one displeased her?” Lady replies, “Our great-grandmother was not a murderess. She was a negress” (*TWDG*, 124). Randall’s novel casts the family’s objection as fear that the cousin’s union would produce a dark-skinned child and reveal the black ancestry of one of Savannah’s most prominent slaveholding families. With definite Faulknerian echoes, Randal reimagines the tale of Lady and Feleepe’s thwarted marriage in terms of racial anxiety and an earlier instance of filial denial.

The second letter, also delivered by R., was sent to him by Cynara’s mother. As Pallas could not read or write, her daughter concludes that she must have traveled to Atlanta to dictate the letter to a Freedman’s Bureau agent but never announced her presence to Cynara. The letter is an appeal to R., written between the breakup of his marriage to Other and Pallas’s death. The letter begins by asserting that R. has already sent one of Pallas’s children back to her broken. Pallas’s plea for her biological daughter is that Cynara, a “love child,” needs a “ring on her finger and some easy days.” She asks that R. let Cynara love him and that R. love Cynara back. As one parent to another, Pallas calls on R. to repay a kind of debt. “For what I done for you little Precious. Yo’ chile dat died,” she asks, “Marry

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<sup>104</sup> Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*, 42, 53.

mah little gal” (*TWDG*, 160).

Cynara writes in her diary that she would give anything to hear Pallas say the words written on paper, to hear her speak the term of endearment “mah little gal” (*TWDG*, 160). In the next sentence, much as she does with the disease metaphor that initially characterizes their relationship, Cynara emends not only the forgoing statement but her entire understanding of their mother-daughter connection. “What am I writing?” she reconsiders, “I would give everything to hear her say anything at all.” Declaring that she wants her mother, she writes, “It’s easy to want her, now that I know she wanted me” (*TWDG*, 160).

After reading the correspondence of Lady and Feleepe, Cynara writes that she had “accepted the injustice of all of them loving her different because she was white,” but the discovery that she and Other share the same racial identity is at first overwhelming. “If she was just a nigger like me but got the chance to live white, it’s too much to bear,” Cynara writes. “But maybe that’s just the way it is, so I’m broke. Right in half” (*TWDG*, 133). Initially, she is devastated by the “trick [Lady] played,” making Cynara believe that “I was one flavor and she was—other—and better than me.” Later, the diarist recalls a conversation when, as a little girl, Cynara accompanied her mistress to deliver the baby of one of the neighborhood’s poor white families (*TWDG*, 134). Cynara confessed that she wished to be white like Lady and that she hated the color of her skin. Lady responded by listing “everything that was brown and beautiful in the world”; she also very nearly confided her ancestry to the child (*TWDG*, 136). Even before reading the cousins’ correspondence, Cynara likens Other’s positive qualities to those she associates with black people. According to Cynara, “there is something wonderful about her and it was exactly this: she has the vitality, the vigor, and the pragmatism of a slave...she was a slave in a white woman’s body, and that’s a sweet drink of cold water” (*TWDG*, 47). While this earlier passage foreshadows Other’s multiracial ancestry, it also contributes to Randall’s overall reversal of how *Gone With the Wind* portrays black characters and blackness. Cynara the adult diarist celebrates

blackness as the source of a proud lineage and cultural heritage.<sup>105</sup> Like Other, Cynara too, has a “chance to live white,” but in accordance with her earlier stated desire not to “go in disguise,” she refuses the conditions of R.’s proposal—that they move to London, where in Cynara’s rendering of R.’s assertion, “no one in London will know that I’m supposed to be colored” (*TWDG*, 158). Cynara records, “I don’t often think on how white I look; it’s always been a question of how colored I feel, and I feel plenty colored.” In the same passage in which she renames him Debt Chauffeur, Cynara tells R., “I am colored, colored black, the way I talk, the way I cook, the way I do most everything.” R.’s assertion that “you don’t have to be,” which he bases on the assumption that Other, who was not much lighter than Cynara, was “black and didn’t seem it,” leads Cynara to declare, “It had never seemed before that he so little knew me” (*TWDG*, 158). After reading her mother’s letter, Cynara continues to ruminate, not only on the question of passing, but on the concept of race. She studies her reflection in the mirror and writes, “It is not in the pigment of my skin that my Negressness lies. It is not the color of my skin. It is the color of my mind, and my mind is dark, dusky, like a beautiful night.” Evoking the concept of blood memory, Cynara writes that Other “had the dusky blood but not the mind, not the memory.” She speculates that if “the memories are not teased forth, they are lost.” She resolves, “I cannot go to London and forget my color” (*TWDG*, 162). In the following diary entry, she writes of Debt’s understanding of race, “I have never known him to be ignorant. But he is. He thinks like the others, the common tide. He thinks that the blackness is in the drop of blood, something of the body” (*TWDG*, 162). In the same entry, she offers another explanation for what separated the sisters. It is no longer that one had “the chance to live white,” but that “part of the blood memory must be provoked and inspired and repaired, time and again, to become the memory” (*TWDG*, 163).

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<sup>105</sup> John E. Sitter also reads this passage as criticism of *Gone With the Wind*’s “portrayal of slaves as listless, lazy, and dull” but suggests that the allusion actually belies the vitality attributed to Other; see “Supplemental Declaration of John E. Sitter,” 4.

## Reconstruction

During Pallas's illness, Cynara speculates that Mammy has surmised the reason R. left Other a month before the diary opens. In Cynara's words, "he's in love with me, and after the Tragedy"—her reference to the death of R. and Other's daughter, Precious—"there's nothing to keep us apart" (*TWDG*, 17). Unknown to anyone else, Cynara stayed with R. and comforted him as he held vigil over the body of little Precious, whose fear of the dark was a mystery to both her father and her unacknowledged aunt. Cynara later learns that the child was subjected to skin-lightening techniques during the night. The diarist dispels any notion that her jealousy of Other extended to Precious or that she delighted in the death that ultimately separated the grieving parents. Cynara adored Precious because she was affectionate to Cynara. The diarist regarded the child as a kind of surrogate for the grandfather she resembled, the man who sold his daughter, Cynara. According to the diarist, Precious gave her Planter's kisses (*TWDG*, 17).

Yet even in the early pages of the diary, Cynara records evidence of a troubled relationship with R. Only two pages after asserting R.'s "love" for her and noting their union of grief over the little girl, the diarist also recounts an exchange of harsh words that ends in violence. In the cemetery, Cynara describes the sexual politics of the South, particularly R.'s beloved Charleston, as "dirty laundry what needs washing"; R. says he sent her to Europe as a jest and slaps Cynara—the first time she has ever been struck by a man. The diarist dismisses the incident by evoking another instance of surrogacy, claiming that R. really wanted to slap Other but slapped Cynara because Other wasn't there (*TWDG*, 19). Yet this physical blow and the phrase it conjures—the rebuttal Beauty teaches her prostitutes to thwart abusive customers—equates R.'s so-called "love" with Cynara's earlier description of their relationship as "concubinage." Additional diary passages suggest their relationship as a tenuous arrangement, dependent on Cynara's continued sexual desirability to R. At one point, she writes, "If I



ever started to get big, R. would let me go.” In another passage, she resolves, “I have half my life before me, and I cannot afford for him to grow bored” (*TWDG*, 2, 12, 153).

As she reflects on her trip to Europe after the cemetery episode, Cynara refuses to believe R.’s taunt. She insists, “Something I cherish so much cannot have been a joke” (*TWDG*, 22). Yet that is exactly what it becomes during their dinner with the black Congressman Adam Conyers. R. and Conyers laugh at the comparison of Cynara’s Grand Tour to that of Sally Hemmings, the reputed slave mistress who accompanied Thomas Jefferson to Paris (*TWDG*, 74). While Cynara and the Congressman delight in her crossing on the *Baltic*, a ship that later carried provisions to Ft. Sumter, she bitterly records how R. alone continued to laugh at “the old, cold joke, embedded like an insect in amber, that the slave Hemmings’ stay in Paris had been a Grand Tour” (*TWDG*, 74). Despite a sustained relationship of nearly fifteen-years and financial support that allows Cynara to reside comfortably in a house designed, built, and staffed for her, despite R.’s role in her education and, to a limited degree, empowerment, he also demonstrates early what takes Cynara more than three-quarters of the novel to realize: R. does not respect Cynara. Their relationship will never be a partnership of equals (*TWDG*, 163). Though Cynara consoled him as he mourned for Precious, R. is oblivious to Cynara’s grief over her mother’s impending death and the painful memories it evokes (*TWDG*, 27).

After Pallas’s funeral, Cynara also begins to examine her relationship with R., wondering but never vocalizing questions like, “Is he ever grateful for anything I do[?]” “When did I start loving R.?” and “Had I ever really loved him, or had I just wanted what was hers?” (*TWDG*, 70, 80). Cynara knew R. a year before he met Other and claims to have told him about her half-sister with a specific purpose: “I wanted someone who loved her to love me more than her.” Though Cynara admits she “didn’t believe anybody who knew us both could love me more,” she says she “had to know” (*TWDG*, 47). Suggesting the marriage of R. and Other as a product of her design, Cynara aligns herself with Garlic and Pallas in her ability to manipulate. But as R.’s attentions function as a kind of substitute for the

affection lacking from her childhood, Cynara's motive is at once perverse and pitiable. With her notions of self-worth formed by the class disparity between the two sisters, Cynara seeks to transcend a lifetime of painful subordination by having just one person, R., prefer her to Other.

While Cynara asserts her belief that R. "loved me first and fiercer" and that he was drawn to Other "as an echo of me," she also associates R. with a notion of romantic love that resembles slavery (*TWDG*, 131-132, 111). At Frederick Douglass's reception, where she again encounters Conyers, Cynara begins to wonder what might be possible between them. "I had been R.'s but no one had ever been mine," she writes. She had "never possessed a man" and had never aspired to "possess a man's soul, for it seemed to close to slaving" (*TWDG*, 111). Later, at a Washington ball, Cynara dances with the Congressman and feels a fleeting sensation of freedom. When R. reclaims her as his dance partner, his touch is like a "shackle snapping on my wrist" and Cynara is suddenly aware that his hand is the same one that signed her bill of sale. With R. as her partner, she experiences a feeling of "being possessed" that she describes as "old, familiar" and "comfortable," but that she also equates with her former chattel bondage and R.'s legal ownership of her (*TWDG*, 144). These lines call to mind the power dynamics of slavery that in *Gone With the Wind* can only be found in the romances of the white planters. Where Scarlett views Rhett's "love" as an opportunity to exercise mastery over him, Cynara must find a way to extricate herself from a relationship that is inextricable from her chattel bondage but that is also, comparatively, her most stable and nurturing interpersonal connection.

Despite her misgivings, Cynara accepts R.'s marriage proposal—her second of the novel—because, as she explains, "I have wanted this for too long to walk away without the prize I have coveted" (*TWDG*, 164). Earlier, when her childhood friend Jeems escorts her back to Atlanta after Pallas's funeral, he asks Cynara to marry him. Declaring that she is "not the marrying kind," Cynara declines the proposal, but the truth of the matter, Cynara explains in her diary, is that "long ago...I stopped letting myself want anything I could not have" (*TWDG*, 68). Her marriage to R. brings to

fruition Cynara's "first woman's dream," which she long considers unattainable; but Cynara's revised understanding of her familial relationships and her attraction to Adam Conyers now renders the marriage less desirable. Formerly his slave, Cynara becomes, legally, R.'s wife but with a growing discontent that causes the marriage to be short-lived.

Before the proposal but just after the Washington ball where Cynara dances with Conyers and R., she is finally able to answer the question, "Had I ever really loved him, or had I just wanted what was hers?" with an awareness of how her new familial insights bear on her relationship with R. Cynara suggests her attachment to R. as a kind of idol worship: "Redeemed I was, I was sold and he bought me. I should let him be my God; I have let him be my God. He redeemed me and I have loved him for it" (*TWDG*, 145). Cynara's wordplay conflates religious redemption with what might easily be misread as her deliverance from slavery, although her statements suggest nothing of freedom. Cynara emphasizes the purchase, the monetary transaction that presumably did not change her status as property but simply transferred legal ownership to R. She also describes her literacy, for which R. is responsible, as an act of creation, though in her Biblical comparison, Cynara names as her partner, not R., but her ability to write. Cynara likens herself to Adam, for whom the pages of her diary are "my Eve and ...my Cains and my Abels and generations descended from Adam" (*TWDG*, 147). What at first seems a peculiar analogy suggests the process of journaling as a means of attaining self-knowledge. It also evokes the first recorded sibling rivalry and anticipates the rebellion of Cynara leaving the false god who becomes her husband (*TWDG*, 147). She also admits that she did not love R. until after he saw Other and wanted them both but wanted Cynara more. Cynara finds the basis of their attachment "coming unraveled" as Lady's letters and Garlic's stories, soon to be confirmed by Pallas's letter, negate the absence of filial affection that R. previously filled. When she eventually leaves her husband, Cynara's assertion that R. has "been a father to me" suggests that paternalistic aspects of their relationship substituted for the fatherly affection Planter denied her but also implies similarities

between the two men who owned her as property.

In the early pages of her diary, Cynara writes of her failed efforts to forget Cotton Farm (*TWDG*, 5). Her recollections, like the porch tableaux that induced spasms in the little girl's soul, reveal memory as the storehouse of psychic pain. R's instructions to "Forget everything before now" and "Don't bring your past into this house" evinces his utter hypocrisy, as he continues to grieve his own losses. The difference of whose past is granted admission suggests the wider cultural phenomenon exemplified by *Gone With the Wind*. That novel and film told a tale of adversity on behalf of dispossessed slaveholders but refused to entertain even the faintest notion that slavery had been a negative experience for people held in bondage. With *Gone With the Wind*, the trauma of defeated Confederates took preeminent place in the public discussion, while any attempt to deal with slavery as a traumatic past was virtually forbidden. For Cynara, the military service of the man she likens to the "ghost of the Confederacy" is likewise a betrayal she cannot forget. The sight of R. in his army uniform "killed something" inside of her. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Randall places little emphasis on the war's role in emancipation because for Cynara, the process of emancipation has more to do with coming to terms with her past. Instead of the war, Randall focuses on the late Reconstruction period, when Cynara actually composes the diary and when the events of the narrative present unfold. Though the epoch serves mainly as a temporal backdrop, the defeat of Reconstruction looms at the end of the novel.

When Jeems visits Cynara en route to Tennessee, where he will become a champion horse trainer, he expresses his desire to take Cynara riding, as he did when they were children. In *SunTrust v. Houghton Mifflin*, Randall cited Jeems as an example of how she transforms a minor character of *Gone With the Wind* to criticize what she considers "perhaps the single most repellent paragraph in Margaret Mitchell's novel: a black child is given to two white children as a birthday present, and the incident is treated in a perfectly matter-of-fact manner, as if the buying and selling of children had no moral

significance.” Quoting Mitchell, Randall notes that in *Gone With the Wind*, Jeems is described as the “body servant,” given to the Tarleton twins as a birthday present and who, “like the dogs, accompanied them everywhere.” “In my novel,” Randall explains, the adult Jeems is “a highly intelligent and perceptive artisan and horse trainer who thrives in his freedom.”<sup>106</sup> Yet on the day of Jeems’s last visit to Cynara, the friends decide against a public outing to avoid an assault on that freedom. Uncertain whether R. would object, they are more concerned that, as Jeems puts it, some other white man who, “thinks Cap’n still owns” Cynara might retaliate with violence. Referring to the recent revelation that Planter once had Jeems whipped for allowing Cynara to ride his horse astride rather than side-saddle, Cynara reflects, “it [would] be worse than a beating Jeems would catch,” if he became the target of a white supremacist assault. “They’re hanging black men all through the trees,” writes Cynara of the domestic terror Mitchell’s novel valorizes. “Strange fruit grow in the Southern night. It’s the boil on the body of Reconstruction, whites killing blacks. They didn’t kill us as often, leastways not directly, when they owned us” (*TWDG*, 83). Later, in Washington, as Cynara worries that R. will end their acquaintance with Adam Conyers if the Congressman loses the next election, she writes, “Reconstruction has been under attack from the moment it was born. The Klan is on the rise and increases in its violence. No one knows how long we coloreds will keep the vote” (*TWDG*, 152-53). Readers of *Gone With the Wind* will recall that when Scarlett O’Hara visits Rhett Butler in the Federal jail to procure tax money, the reason reported for his incarceration is that he killed a black man for being “uppity to a lady.” While this report actually seems to improve his reputation among ex-planters who despise him as a cad and a war profiteer, he later averts a mass arrest of Atlanta’s white ex-planters by providing a false alibi that places them at Belle Whatling’s brothel during their Ku Klux Klan raid of Shantytown. Mitchell’s Rhett Butler abets and confesses to precisely the sort of white supremacist violence that Cynara records as a prelude to Reconstruction’s end. With R./Debt cast as

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<sup>106</sup> Alice Randall, “Declaration of Alice Randall,” 4.

the “ghost of the Confederacy,” and with African American Congressman Adam Conyers as the embodiment of black enfranchisement, Cynara’s amorous conflicts, like the *mésalliance* unions of *Gone With the Wind*, assume the significance of postwar national politics. When Cynara first experiences freedom while dancing with the Congressman, only to be repossessed by R., that Washington ball symbolizes the black political freedom associated with Reconstruction, followed by the reversal that freedom—largely through extralegal violence—in what white Southerners erroneously termed “Redemption.” In the national political context, R.’s role of having “redeemed” Cynara and looking like the “ghost of the Confederacy,” not only suggests him as a relic of Cynara’s former enslavement but aligns him with the defeat of Reconstruction.

Writing of her second dance with Conyers, which takes place after Cynara leaves her husband, the diarist writes, “This short night they call Reconstruction is ending...This is our Götterdämmerung. This is the twilight and we are the gods” (TWDG, 202). Here, Randall conjures speeches by Ashley Wilkes and Rhett Butler, of *Gone With the Wind*, in which the two rivals separately suggest the Civil War and Reconstruction as the Götterdämmerung of a planter class who thought themselves gods. The reference also evokes the last in a series of four operas by Richard Wagner, based on German and Norse mythology and known collectively as *The Ring of the Nibelung*. The evocation of the *Ring* cycle, first performed as a tetralogy in August 1876, and the subsequent report of Conyers’s Congressional defeat suggest the conclusion of *The Wind Done Gone* coincides with the disputed election of 1876 and the political compromise that effectively ended Reconstruction. In broad terms, Wagner’s operatic cycle is a multi-generational story about struggles for power and possession of a cursed ring forged from Rhinegold. Much of the conflict stems from deception and paternal betrayal by the god Wotan, who allows his illegitimate son Sigfried to die in battle, then strips his daughter Brunnhilde of her supernatural powers for attempting to aid her brother. Though the ring is ultimately returned to the rightful guardians of the Rhinegold, *Twilight of the Gods* inexplicably concludes with the destruction of

Valhalla, along with all the gods and fallen warriors the Valkyries have carried from their battlefields. According to writer Charles Osborne, Wagner had initially planned for the return of the ring to “lead to a new and happier era for gods and mankind.” The composer ultimately decided to end the gods’ reign in an all-consuming fire because he was more compelled musically by the apocalyptic end Wotan envisions in the second opera, *The Valkyrie*.<sup>107</sup>

While Cynara evokes the conclusion of *Ring* cycle as an allegory for the end of Reconstruction, the second opera also contains a theme that was used in the original film score of D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*. In the film known for its racist depiction of Reconstruction and its glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” provided the musical accompaniment for the climactic ride of the terrorist group, whose members are portrayed as rescuing the white South from black mobs and freedmen.<sup>108</sup> The film was eventually rescored,<sup>109</sup> but in *Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell’s account of Reconstruction politics is so consistent with Griffith’s degrading scenes of black legislators, readers might well imagine she based those passages on a screening of *Birth of a Nation*. Through Cynara’s musical allusion, Randall conjures and takes aim at these white supremacist narratives about black politicians and the politics of Reconstruction.

In *The Wind Done Gone*, the diary passage that concludes with the operatic allegory begins with Cynara’s homage to the survivors of slavery and first generation of black freedmen:

I look around me at these new Negroes, this talented tenth, this first harvest, the brightest minds, the sustained souls...Folks whose fathers were named Fearless and were freed because their master was afraid to own them. The ones who could intimidate from shackles. These beautiful

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<sup>107</sup> Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Richard Wagner* (North Pomfret, Vermont: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 1990), 257; also see Osborne’s plot summaries “*Das Rheingold (The Rhinegold)*,” ch.9; “*Die Walkure (The Valkyrie)*,” ch.10; “*Siegfried*,” ch. 11; and “*Götterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods)*” ch.12, in *The Complete Operas of Richard Wagner*.

<sup>108</sup> Martin Miller Marks, *Music and Silent Film: Context and Case Studies, 1895-1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 140.

<sup>109</sup> Priscilla Barlow, “Surreal Symphonies: *L’Age d’or* and the Discreet Charms of Classical Music,” *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, ed. Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight (Duram, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 33.

ones. They are as close to gods as we have seen walk the earth...the ones who survived the culling-out of the middle passage, and the mental shackles of slavery; the group that rose with the first imperfect freedoms to the Capital, this group of Negroes shining brightly as their—as our—flame burns down as our time passes (*TWDG*, 201).

Adam Conyers, whom Cynara associates with her personal liberation, is also the exemplar of political progress during Reconstruction. He is, by Cynara's description, "a brilliant black man" who stands tallest "in the company of the nation's finest men" (*TWDG*, 202). Describing the last musical performance in *Twilight of the Gods*, Charles Osborne writes, "After the doom-laden motif of the twilight of the gods as Valhalla is consumed by fire, the consoling theme of redemption by love wells up in the orchestra to spread its balm over all."<sup>110</sup> While Randall exalts Reconstruction in the person of Adam Conyers and portrays the dawning era of "Redemption" as the African American *Götterdämmerung*, the theme she does not mention by title but implicitly evokes through the opera, "Redemption by Love," aptly suggests the narrative trajectory of *The Wind Done Gone* and what Randall meant when she described the novel as "a story of reading, writing, and redemption." After Cynara alters her understanding of familial relationships and works through her traumatic past, the meaning of redemption is transmuted from that of a property transaction and a misnomer for the reinstitution of white supremacy to a connotation of freedom and spiritual uplift.

**"Things I Thought I Would Never Forget I Have Forgotten. Things I Have Prayed To Forget I Have Remembered."**

Early in the novel, while Cynara and Beauty discuss the dilemma of whether or not Cynara should visit her mother, Beauty speculates that R. might marry Cynara if she gave him a reason, implying a baby. When Cynara claims she doesn't want to give R. a reason, Beauty replies that Cynara

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<sup>110</sup> Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Richard Wagner*, 257.



has “gone straight crazy, took the Black Diamond Express. Makes no stops and arrives in hell early” (TWDG, 25). Though somewhat anachronistic for the 1870s, the Black Diamond Express was the subject of a sermon recorded by preacher A.W. Nix in the 1920s titled, “The Black Diamond Express to Hell.” As Nix explained to his congregation, on this train, “Sin is the engineer. Pleasure is the headlight and the devil is the conductor.”<sup>111</sup> As he chronicled the various stops along the way, sinners came aboard the Black Diamond Express, first at Liars Avenue, followed by Decieversville, and so on.<sup>112</sup> The counterpart to the Black Diamond Express, documented in another of Nix’s sermons was the “The White Flyer to Heaven,” where “God is the engineer, The Holy Ghost is the headlight, and Jesus is the conductor.”<sup>113</sup> In Nix’s sermons, the train was the vehicle for a spiritual journey. In Beauty’s estimation, Cynara’s journey begins with the diarist figuratively en route to hell for the lie that she does not want to marry R. or have a child. By the end of the novel, Cynara’s journey finds her literally on a train bound for Washington and her beloved Congressman, whose child she carries. Cynara reveals the pregnancy during the dance she calls their *Götterdämmerung*. The diarist notes, during her rail travel, that she also carries Lady’s emerald earbobs, which she eventually sells to buy a cottage. Her possession of the earrings and the ruminations they inspire are important milestones in her spiritual journey, which begins on her twenty-eighth birthday, with R.’s gift of the blank diary, a pen, and emerald earbobs that she suspects are probably “just green glass” but hopes may be “genuine peridots” (TWDG, 1). Throughout Randall’s novel, Cynara is associated with peridots, which she understands to be less valuable than emeralds. In addition to the birthday gift that Cynara takes for either strass or the less valued peridot, Beauty gives Cynara a peridot ring, and Garlic recalls that Cynara was born with

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<sup>111</sup> Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds., *Preaching With Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 442.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 442-443.

<sup>113</sup> Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1984), 151.

“peridot green eyes” (*TWDG*, 59). Notably, in *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett O’Hara’s eyes are described as “emerald.”<sup>114</sup> In *The Wind Done Gone*, Cynara associates Other with emeralds when she considers the gems to be among the items that Other possessed and Cynara wanted, though none more than Other’s love for Pallas. When R. returns from Charleston with an emerald ring for Cynara, she “can’t help liking it, because it looks like something Other would have liked” (*TWDG*, 89). With that ring procured well in advance of R.’s proposal, and eventually replaced by a gold band with Lady and Feleepe’s initials, Cynara suggests the many obstacles to their potential marriage that are not likely to be overcome—“As if we could marry before they [R. and Other] divorce. As if everyone will forget he was a war profiteer before he was a blockade buster, as if I can forget he was a Confederate soldier” (*TWDG*, 89). Cynara’s spiritual journey, which finds her shuttling geographically between Atlanta, Cotton Farm and Washington, is largely an excavation of memory that recalls and revises the trauma of enslavement, which for Cynara is defined by her natal alienation. When Cynara writes that she has never forgiven her mother for the hours she stood in the Charleston slave market, that she doesn’t know how to forgive her mother and love herself, she follows with a declaration on memory, that includes lyrics of a lullaby: “After the paste peace of forgetting, she,” meaning the dying Pallas, “calls to me and I remember. Forgetting is to forgiving as glass is to a diamond, mockingbird.” By this logic, forgetting is the lesser, imitation material that Cynara also suspects composes her birthday earbobs, while forgiveness is the analogue of genuine diamonds. In her third diary entry, Cynara recalls her ten-year-old self darting past Other and bumping into a sideboard, causing a dish to shatter into “a hundred porcelain shards” onto the floor. Her mother threatened to beat Cynara with a belt, but Other said she was the offender to spare Mammy the pain of having to administer a whipping (*TWDG*, 3). This memory, which embodies the competition Cynara feels with Other for parental affection, suggests another referent for the diarist’s glass-diamond analogy, as Cynara recalls “stained-glass colored light

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<sup>114</sup> Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*, 75, 243, 583.

that fell in rows of blue and pink diamonds” down the hallway (*TWDG*, 3). After first positing her analogy of memory and gemstones, the diarist then alters the equation with the addition of lullaby lyrics, “If that golden ring turns brass, Daddy’s going to buy you a looking glass, mocking bird.” In this lyrical equation, glass—as in looking glass, of which there are many throughout the novel—may be inferior to the diamond, but it is also father’s resort when the mockingbird, famous for its mimicry, fails to sing and when the golden ring by some strange alchemy turns to brass. As one musical historian explains, the song itself “suggests the ephemeral quality of possessions that get broken or do not work properly. The only true and lasting gift the parent can give is love and care and pride in ‘the sweetest little baby in town.’”<sup>115</sup> This of, course, is exactly what Cynara is denied as the slave child of Mammy and Planter, and it is telling that Cynara’s recitation of the song cuts off well before the final line that connotes the parent’s unconditional love. Instead, the lyrics that would typically be sung to soothe a child to sleep segue into Cynara’s account of the slavery dream that acquires its rice imagery from her father’s letter. Writing that the past comes back to her in “bits and pieces,” Cynara’s linguistic struggle to put her experience into words follows a logical progression that is only apparent much later as the reversal of a process Cynara describes at the end of her wedding trip.

Her visit with R., who inherited the property from Other, is Cynara’s second return and third departure from Cotton Farm. Her description of the decorative glasswork and diamond-shaped muntins surrounding the front door suggest the source of the light pattern she recalls in her earlier memory of breaking Lady’s dish (*TWDG*, 167). Preparation for the newlyweds’ departure recalls the day Planter sent Cynara away. His parting explanation to her, ironically, was that he would not wait until the day his enslaved daughter became the mistress of her sister’s husband. Rejecting Cynara’s suggestion of manumission, Planter insisted that literal enslavement to a rich master was preferable to a life of

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<sup>115</sup> Robert V. Wells, *Life flows on in Endless Song: Folk Songs and American History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 29.

poverty. His assertion regarding Pallas that he was “willing to lose another [child] to make her feel the loss of one,” implies that he blamed her for his sons’ deaths and sold Cynara to punish her mother. The security Planter expected she would have in being sold to his wealthy friend was soon destroyed by a flu epidemic that left her to be passed along with furniture to a succession of heirs, until she was eventually sold and bought by Beauty (*TWDG*, 174). In an early entry, Cynara explains that the deaths happened in such rapid succession, no one had time to write planter and ask if he wanted to buy her back. In the fuller account written as she prepares to conclude her wedding trip, Cynara records how she was so badly sunburned from standing in the slave market, the skin from her chest peeled off in sheets (*TWDG*, 174). As the lives of the two biological sisters, Cynara and Other, diverge along the same ideologies of race that organize their slave society, Cynara’s trauma manifests in her physical wound, in the burning and peeling away of Cynara’s flesh as a result of exposure in the slave market.

Boarding R.’s carriage for departure from Cotton Farm, Cynara reflects on the experience that distinguishes her current and former selves. “It was an altogether different girl that got into Planter’s [carriage],” she writes (*TWDG*, 174). “Back then, before the country was at war...” writes Cynara, “before the first public brother-against-brother blood had been publicly shed, I went to war, and I was a battlefield” (*TWDG*, 174). Here, civil war is not about the armed sectional conflict of 1861-1865 but a metaphor for the internal psychological battle of Randall’s heroine, which predates the national hostilities. Four years earlier, Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* conflated physical, spiritual, and psychological wounds in the story of a Confederate deserter who walks home to the Blue Ridge Mountains in search of redemption and spiritual rebirth. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Alice Randall’s diarist expresses her psychological trauma of enslavement in terms of soldiers’ battle wounds. Forgetting, for Cynara, is like primitive field medicine that in the process of saving her life also does extraordinary violence to the patient. “My shield against pain,” writes Cynara, “was my own screamless, bloodless battlefield surgery performed without ether or alcohol.” Such a treatment without

anesthetic would be an excruciating operation, more likely to exacerbate than alleviate her pain. “I cut off memories, I gouged out feelings the way you gouged out the little dirty laces on a potato you pick up in the field,” she writes. “I amputated and cauterized with searing thoughts...and with the bleeding parts cut way, the necessary places cauterized, I survived as fortunate soldiers do. I fought my war before the war” (*TWDG*, 175). Yet this amputation of memory is the same forgetting Cynara equates with an artificial “paste peace,” and the parental gifts that all malfunction. In the later entry, Cynara articulates a new division in her life narrative. She no longer sees her life being “cleaved” by Other pulling away from Mammy and usurping Cynara’s place with Lady. She writes, “it’s not slavery and freedom that separate my now from my then; it’s when I could read and when I could not; it’s when Mammy loved me and I didn’t know it, and when Mammy loved me and I did. It is when Lady was white and when Lady was black.” Noting the parallels of her first, forced departure and now, she writes, “It is still me, and it’s still a carriage, but me in the carriage has changed more than I would have thought possible.” Her assertion that “all my old dreams have come true,” is doubly accurate, both in the sense that her rice dream came to fruition when she first returned to Cotton Farm and took up the burden of remembering her past and also in the sense that her “first woman’s dream” of marrying R. is now a reality that makes her mistress of Cotton Farm.

The realization of these former aspirations proves less than satisfying to Cynara whose assertion that she is “too tired to dream anew” suggests both emotional exhaustion and physical fatigue symptomatic of her increasingly apparent health crisis. The scarlet butterfly that she sees in her reflection figuratively suggests her metamorphosis but is literally the signature skin rash of lupus, the autoimmune disease that the postscript reveals is Cynara’s eventual cause of death several years after diary ends. Cynara’s aching bones and her sensitivity to sunlight indicated by the severity of her sunburn are also symptomatic of the disease in which the body’s immune system attacks healthy tissue.

Lupus can also present as memory loss.<sup>116</sup> The fear of forgetting that Cynara states early on when she resolves to record everything in her diary acquires a new meaning in the context of her illness. The night of Pallas's funeral, as Cynara persuades Garlic to talk of her mother, she cites an example of why more than one person should be privy to the Tata slaves' history: "If I forget what happened to me in Charleston and you don't know it to remind me, it's gone. A year of my life gone like termites eating out the middle of a wood board, vanished into a mouth and flown away. Gone with the wind" (*TWDG*, 58). As Cynara evokes both the title of Mitchell's novel and Ernest Dowson's poetic line "I have forgot much, Cynara. Gone With the Wind," her concern about forgetting Charleston seems to conflict with her earlier assertion, "I don't want to remember anything of Charleston at all" (*TWDG*, 8). These ostensibly contradictory statements reveal a tension between Cynara's fear of memory loss as a symptom of her illness and her fear of remembering a past that, beginning with her mother's illness, starts "breaking in like a robber in the night"—a past she fears more with each passing day (*TWDG*, 27, 28). The diarist suggests that same tension when she writes that she no longer retains the knowledge to distinguish a lemon-scented verbena plant from the poisonous wild herb it resembles. According to Cynara, "Things I thought I would never forget I have forgotten. Things I have prayed to forget I have remembered" (*TWDG*, 143).

If as Cynara suggests, forgetting is an artificial peace, the lesser alternative to forgiveness, then the process of remembering her traumatic past and integrating the new knowledge of maternal love into her life narrative allows Cynara to achieve genuine forgiveness, which she records in a revised family narrative: "Once in Georgia I had a sister who loved my mother dearly; she took care of Mama all her life, better care of her than I took. I hated her and buried her and now I forgive her. Once in Georgia I had a mother I could not find my way to loving. I'm grateful that Other found a way and kept the path

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<sup>116</sup> Mayo Clinic staff, "Lupus," in "Health Information: Diseases and Conditions, A-Z," <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/lupus/DS00115> (accessed April 7, 2012); "Lupus Symptoms," Lupus Guide, WebMD, <http://lupus.webmd.com/guide/lupus-systemic-lupus-erythematosus-symptoms> (accessed April 7, 2012).

clean and brightly used. She made exquisite use of my mother's love" (*TWDG*, 196). In a novel where names are especially important, the fact that Cynara begins to refer to her sibling as "my sister," is doubly significant. She no longer resorts to the pejorative Other, and she acknowledges the filial relationship she earlier denies when she says to Jeems, "I don't have a sister" (*TWDG*, 68). By the novel's conclusion, Cynara not only forgives her sister but dons her clothes as she leaves her husband. Explaining that she cannot go to her Congressman wearing the garments R. has purchased, Cynara leaves behind every item R./Debt has bought for her, including her wedding ring and earrings. Their parting conversation reveals that much as her mother's name eluded Cynara, R. does not know his spouse's real name until the moment of her departure. On the train to Washington, dressed in her sister's clothes and carrying Lady's emerald earrings, the diarists' reflections on the value of emeralds and peridots, suggest that she has also achieved self-acceptance:

Some folks say emeralds are higher than peridots because there are more peridots in the world. It's what's scarce is high. I say it's because the rich folks found emeralds first and have more of them, so they say the peridot be just a little better than green-colored glass to give higher value to what they have a higher number of. Like white blood. But a man made the green-colored glass and God made the emerald and the peridot, and I can't help knowing the peridot is the pretty color of grass in the fall, the color of living things that survive the thirst of late summer when there's so much gold in the green. I see the peridot and the emerald are the same beautiful thing, and green glass is something altogether different (*TWDG*, 193-194).

In the second to last diary entry, Cynara reports the birth of a "legitimate heir" to the Congressman. Conyers's marriage to Corinne, the medical college graduate, assures Corinne the husband and baby she wants, though she feels her marital options are otherwise limited by infertility. Their union maintains Conyers's respectability in a black community that will not tolerate his open affair with the still-married wife—and former mistress—of an ex-Confederate; and it leaves the baby, named Cyrus in honor of Cynara, in the care of three doting parents while affording him the public legitimacy that Cynara never had as the child of Planter and Mammy. The end of the novel finds Cynara, by her own design, once again the paramour of a married man, though as she writes of Corinne in her final entry,

“a lifetime of hating Other has made me fit for an eternity of loving her” (*TWDG*, 206). Cynara, who is officially designated Cyrus’s “Godmother” calls him Moses. She tells him the Biblical story of the baby set afloat in the bulrushes by one mother and rescued by another. Early in *The Wind Done Gone*, the theme of surrogacy has Cynara suffering a blow intended for her sister; by its conclusion, surrogacy is about the birth of the child in whom Cynara sees as the greatest hope for black liberation after the defeat of Reconstruction (*TWDG*, 206). In the same early passage that likens the absence of love between Cynara and Pallas to a disease like smallpox, the diarist also declares her certainty that “angels weep every time a dusky Mama is blind to the beauty of her darky child”—what Cynara calls the mother’s “ebony jewel” (*TWDG*, 43). In that earlier passage and in the language of gemstones that she will fully articulate en route to meeting the Congressman, Cynara recognizes the black child as a divine creation and laments that some mothers’ acceptance of racist ideologies render them incapable of appreciating the beauty of black children. While Cynara’s concept of beauty includes the common contemporary definition of comeliness, it also evokes a more classical usage that equates beauty with godliness. Though Cynara first reflects on this maternal blindness in relation to her own mother, it recurs as a threat of infanticide reported in one of Feeleepe’s letters to Lady. After Lady reveals the cousins’ black ancestor as the reason for the family’s objection to their marriage, Feeleepe recounts a conversation with Lady’s mother. She recalls her pregnancy and that of Feeleepe’s mother as “agony, greatly lessened but not ended by the arrival of perfect pink infants” (*TWDG*, 124). Feeleepe relates how the vigilant mothers watched their babies for the slightest sign of darkening. When Feeleepe asks what his aunt would have done if she had noticed any color in her daughter, Lady’s mother replies, “I would have put the pillow on her face and I would have cried” (*TWDG*, 124-125). Like the practice of starving black babies, as in the case of Miss Priss’s brother, the prospect of Lady’s mother smothering her child is one of several parental transgressions through which Randall renders slavery as an abomination to families. Randall reverses the anxiety of Lady and Feeleepe’s mothers when Cynara



pronounces her son “a beautiful, beautiful boy” and records how “He came into the world so pale, his mother fretted for days over his little Moses crib, praying for a little dark to come in” (*TWDG*, 203). In her final entry, addressed to Adam Conyers, Cynara writes, “I have never felt so loved as the day we waited for the baby’s color to show or not show.” She also instructs Conyers to tell their son he was his mother’s great accomplishment. As a mother, Cynara knows and espouses what “had been killed out of too many of my people,” including Pallas. “I bore a little black baby,” Cynara declares, “and knew it was the best baby in the world” (*TWDG*, 206).

With the birth of baby Cyrus, Cynara says she now understands something of Mealy Mouth and agrees that the best days are the days that babies come. Her evocation of Mealy Mouth also prompts another declaration of forgiveness. Cynara forgives Mealy Mouth for having Miss Priss’s brother beaten to death and Miss Priss both for killing Mealy Mouth and the effect that death had on Other and, by extension, Cynara.

With Adam Conyers’s defeat in the Congressional election, *The Wind Done Gone* announces but does not depict the white supremacist rule that followed Reconstruction. Instead, a postscript carries the conclusion of the narrative four generations into the future, into a more promising era of American politics. With a campaign financed by a mortgage on Cotton Farm, Cynara and Adam’s great-grandson, Cyrus the third, is elected to Congress. That Cyrus is married to a Tennessee lawyer descended from Jeems, the champion horse trainer and childhood friend whose proposal Cynara declined. As the postscript relates the marriage of the lawyer and congressman and the presidential aspirations of their son, little Cyrus Jeems, Randall celebrates the professional accomplishments and ambitions of Cotton Farm’s ex-slaves and generations of their descendants (*TWDG*, 207-208). The very last line of the novel, restates Scarlett O’Hara’s refusal to examine the past, “Tomorrow is another day,” as an elegy to the slave ancestors: “For all those we love for whom tomorrow will not be another day, we send the sweet prayer of resting in peace” (*TWDG*, 208).

## The Second Sequel

The novel known in *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* as the “Second Sequel” became Donald McCaig’s 2007 novel *Rhett Butler’s People*. While slavery is only a small part of McCaig’s novel, it is central to the Butler family’s father-son disputes first imagined in *Gone With the Wind*. McCaig’s early chapters show Rhett’s reputation as an outcast to be the result of his youthful rebellion against planter society and the very race and class divisions his father strove to uphold. The opening dual between Rhett and Shadrach Watling, Belle’s brother, cuts off the moment the shots are fired, and the narrative flashes back nine years earlier to twelve-year-old Rhett being caned by his father. Langston Butler complains his son will not accompany him during legislative sessions, avoids socializing with other planter men, and refuses to learn to drive slaves. “Indeed,” the father complains to Rhett, “it is safe to say you reject every proper duty of a Carolina gentleman’s son. You sir, are a renegade.”<sup>117</sup>

Fashioning his young protagonist in the image of one of the nineteenth century’s greatest boy rebels, McCaig casts young Rhett Butler as the Carolina planter version of Huckleberry Finn. Like most rice planters, Langston Butler absents himself from his plantation during the hot summer months when fevers are rampant, but his eldest son remains in residence at Broughton, sometimes embarking on multi-day excursions to explore the surrounding wilderness. Rhett shares the fish and game he catches with his father’s slaves and spends Sundays in the slave quarters. From the slaves, Rhett learns about medicinal properties of herbs and practical matters about rice farming. He is well versed in both the natural world and the culture of slaves. He rejects his society’s common notions of race and class and resists his father’s efforts to fashion Rhett as a gentleman slaveholder.

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<sup>117</sup> Donald McCaig, *Rhett Butler’s People* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), 14. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *RBP*.

One of the defining episodes of Rhett's adolescence is the fatal punishment his father imposes on a slave who dares to thwart the sexual advances of the overseer's son. Shadrach Watling routinely coerces slave women, but when he makes known his intentions toward the wife of Broughton's trunk master, Will forcibly tosses Shadrach into the street to the delight of the other slaves. To avert further slave defiance, Langston Butler orders Shadrach to administer two hundred lashes, what is essentially a death sentence for Will. Even the overseer Isaiah Watling argues Will's actions are justified and that his son Shad is "no account" (*RBP*, 16). Langston simply replies, "But he's white." In the master's view, any slave's resistance to white authority threatens to undermine the entire institution. Rhett, who has befriended Will and often accompanies him as goes about his work, tries but fails to countermand his father's order. Rather than stay and witness his friend's murder, Rhett flees Broughton in his skiff. Swearing what echoes but chronologically predates Scarlett O'Hara's oath against hunger, Rhett vows that "when he was a man, he would never be helpless again" (*RBP*, 17).

Having inconveniently set sail at the start of a hurricane, Rhett finds shelter with a free black family, the Bonneaus, with whom he begins a long friendship. Thomas Bonneau was freed by his white master-father; he has a son, Tunis, about Rhett's age. After the storm, Rhett spends ten days with the family, helping them repair their home. When he finally returns to Broughton, Will has been buried and his wife sold. Three years later, Rhett runs away from his father and lives with the Bonneaus for thirteen weeks, during which time he becomes known as "Thomas Bonneau's white 'son.'" When Langston Butler learns his whereabouts, he threatens the Bonneaus with enslavement if they "interfere" again; he puts Rhett to work as a field hand with instructions that Isaiah Watling whip him if he runs away or disobeys (*RBP*, 22-23). Ostensibly intended to teach his son "discipline," the punishment of having him live and work alongside the Butler slaves only seems to foster mutual sympathy, especially since the slaves who are ordered to ostracize him return Rhett's earlier generosity by sharing food from their own small allotments. When the rumor of the arrangement reaches Wade Hampton, the senator

arranges for an appointment to West Point, from which Rhett is expelled three years later. The final straw for Langston is the pregnancy of the overseer's daughter, Belle, whose child Shadrach accuses Rhett of fathering. The morning Rhett returns from having killed Shadrach Watling in the duel that opens the novel, Langston ceremoniously strikes Rhett's name from the family bible and formally ostracizes his son.

Langston apparently believes the accusation of paternity that Rhett claims is a lie but that even Belle's son Tazwell eventually accepts as fact. Years later, after Rhett finds Belle destitute and begging in the streets of New Orleans, he provides financial assistance and generally looks after Tazwell as a self-appointed guardian. This benefaction leads Tazwell to believe that Rhett is indeed his father. Though he never recognizes Tazwell as his son, Rhett also does not refute this common assumption, which is only resolved at the end of the novel, when Tazwell's real father acknowledges the son in his will. The revelation recasts Rhett's years of support and guardianship. What many perceived as a tacit admission of his paternal responsibility reflects Rhett's personal code of honor, which surpasses that of his peers.

Mystified paternity was historically a common aspect of slaves' experience, particularly for the enslaved children of slaveowners. Desire for parental acknowledgement, particularly on the part of multi-racial children, has been expressed by such fictional characters as William Faulkner's Charles Bon, E.L. Doctorow's Pearl Jameson, and Alice Randall's Cynara. In *Rhett Butler's People*, however, the only mention of any multi-racial character is Thomas Bonneau and Rhett Butler's Creole mistress, who reportedly died trying to terminate a pregnancy. Mystified paternity is central to the plot of *Rhett Butler's People*, but McCaig confines the issue to the child of two white parents—a planter's son and an overseer's daughter. The father's decision to remain anonymous while Belle bears the public disgrace impugns the notion of honor among white planters, but as McCaig's novel focuses on the class disparity of white characters, multi-racial children are nearly as absent from *Rhett Butler's People* as

they are from *Gone With the Wind*.

Continuing the theme of father-son conflicts, Donald McCaig elaborates the friction between Langston Butler and his father, briefly noted in *Gone With the Wind*. Rhett's grandfather, Louis Valentine Butler purchased three thousand acres for Boughton with money he reportedly acquired pirating Spanish and Mexican ships, though some were rumored to have been "flying the American flag" (*RBP*, 30). While Langston quarreled with his father, whose name is no longer spoken in the Butler household, his ethical objections apparently do not extend to his uncle Middleton, who received three hundred acres of confiscated Loyalist property by waiting until after the Revolution to choose a side. Middleton also engaged in the slave trade until "Charleston's council ordered him to dump dead negroes farther out to sea" because "Corpses were washing ashore at White Point, where Charleston's gentry took Sabbath promenades" (*RBP*, 30). Similarly, Langston Butler supports an illegal international slave trade as a "willing buyer" of African slaves, twenty years after the importation was outlawed in the United States.

Beyond Rhett's early rebellion against his father and the slaveholding class he represents, slavery is also a way for Rhett to torment his rival. In *Gone With the Wind*, Melanie Wilkes sews a new flannel uniform as a Christmas present for Ashley when he is home on leave. Not to be outdone, Scarlett secretly gives Ashley a yellow silk sash and professes her love for him. The sash, according to McCaig, is sewn from a scarf given to Scarlett by Rhett. It is an item of deep sentimental attachment, meant to coincide with a sincere declaration of Rhett's affection, but the conversation devolves into typical verbal sparring before Rhett can explain the importance of the scarf that Scarlett promptly re-gifts to Ashley. When Rhett meets Ashley fully outfitted at the train station, he makes a point of complimenting the sash, which he knows has been inappropriately received from a woman other than Ashley's wife. Ashley steers the conversation to romantic recollections of the Twelve Oaks gardens, the slave fiddler who, Ashley claims, "never did a lick of honest work," and bondspeople he recalls

condescendingly as being “like happy children.” In the same spirit of discomfiting his rival, Rhett asks if Ashley has ever personally whipped a slave. Ashley claims there was no need and recalls “naught but kindness” from his father. Rhett persists, however, in undermining Ashley’s false idyll about master-bondsmen relations: “What did you do with ‘impertinent’ negroes? Sell them?” For Ashley, the question conjures a “suppressed childhood memory” of “a weeping negress clutching Ashley’s father’s knees as the slave speculator’s cart took her husband away” (*RBP*, 165). The two men born of the same planter class hold very different views of the slave regime. Rhett, who has temporarily lived and worked as a field hand, unsettles Ashley’s romantic delusions about slavery. But this confrontation of world views in *Rhett Butler’s People* is comparatively slight, and its significance to the novel as a whole is as much about romantic rivalry as it is about discrediting Ashley’s nostalgia.

In Part Two of the novel, McCaig records a baffling Confederate patriotism on the part of Mammy. When Scarlett instructs her to “give smaller portions to the vagrants,” Mammy replies that “Tata ain’t never turned folks away hungry, and these boys ain’t no vagrants, they’s soldier boys!” (*RBP*, 204). McCaig’s Mammy does not repeat the same overt criticism Mitchell’s character levels toward ex-slaves who assert their autonomy, but she inexplicably advocates special treatment for veterans who fought to keep her enslaved.

In his Reconstruction chapters, McCaig expands the incident that in *Gone With the Wind* has Rhett locked in a Federal jail. The man he kills is his longtime friend Tunis Bonneau, who asks Rhett to shoot him before he is lynched. When Tunis refuses the solicitation of a prostitute, the woman retaliates by screaming for help and falsely accusing Tunis of assault. Tunis’s accuser previously worked as a housemaid for Belle Watling, the same position Cynara formerly held as a slave in Beauty’s brothel in *The Wind Done Gone*. Whether a mere coincidence or an intentional gibe at Randall’s novel, Bonneau’s accuser refuses to retract her false allegation, even when Rhett offers her a bribe. On their way to drag Bonneau from the jail, the lynch mob hears a gunshot and discovers Tunis Bonneau lying

dead. When they demand to know why Rhett pre-empted the violence they had planned, he recapitulates the explanation Mitchell offered in *Gone With the Wind*. In even more racist language intended to mask his true intention from the mob, Rhett replies, “The nigger was disrespectful to a white woman” (*RBP*, 232). Undeterred, the mob proceeds to desecrate the corpse by burning and hanging, in all likelihood tortures Tunis Bonneau would have suffered if he had been seized alive. In this single episode, McCaig illustrates the murderous violence white supremacists committed and justified with the lie that Mitchell repeats, that they were avenging the sexual assault of white women. McCaig also highlights the utter hypocrisy among the participants who were “respectable men acting from what they saw as duty” because either they had sexually exploited slave women or they knew others who had, and they “could not imagine that black men would not do to white women what white men had done to their women” (*RBP*, 232). While McCaig’s novel seemingly transforms *Gone With the Wind* by repudiating the violence of Reconstruction that Mitchell does not question, he also reframes the episode so that the single most appalling act associated with Mitchell’s Rhett becomes a merciful last resort to spare his friend even greater torture. *Rhett Butler’s People* portrays the extralegal violence of Reconstruction in its brutality and lays bare the lie of sexual assault that *Gone With the Wind* invokes to justify vigilante assaults on freedmen. One can’t help noticing, however, that Rhett’s clever resourcefulness, which allows him to run blockades, rescue Tazwell Watling from certain death at Fort Fisher, and avert a mass arrest of Atlanta’s ex-planters, ultimately deserts him against the forces of racial oppression. As a twelve-year-old boy, he is powerless to save Will from a fatal whipping. As an adult, he is almost as helpless when the only relief he can offer Tunis Bonneau is to accommodate his friend’s request for a quick death. Later, when he averts the Klansmen’s arrest by having Belle and her workers provide false alibis, McCaig’s Rhett does so begrudgingly and with the admonition, “If it wasn’t for your womenfolk, I’d let you all hang” (*RBP*, 261).

In *Rhett Butler’s People* Rhett’s interracial friendships, his rejection of slaveholder ideology,

and his resulting reputation as a “renegade” all aim to endear the protagonist to a modern audience. But when Rhett’s rebellion against race and class culminates in a revision of Mitchell’s most significant Reconstruction episodes, the most McCaig achieves is an ambivalent rewriting. McCaig’s account of Tunis Bonneau’s plight acknowledges how repugnant Mitchell’s version of Reconstruction is to modern readers, but by exculpating Rhett from the white supremacist violence in which *Gone With the Wind* implicates him, the approved sequel may also be interpreted as attempt to sanitize Mitchell’s narrative. Whether McCaig’s novel seeks to remedy a deeply problematic portrayal of Reconstruction or absolve *Gone With the Wind* for its unabashed racism is a matter open for debate. As an authorized sequel, *Rhett Butler’s People* augments and revises elements of *Gone With the Wind* but also takes care not to “taint” the original.



## Chapter 12

### ***The Known World: Race, Class, and Family Relations in Edward P. Jones's America***

At the end of Edward P. Jones's 2003 novel *The Known World*, a letter from Calvin Newman to his sister Caldonia describes a remarkable work of art he encounters soon after his arrival in Washington, D.C. The "enormous wall hanging" depicts an aerial view of the structures and infrastructure of fictional Manchester County, Virginia, where most of the novel is set. The mural, "made with every kind of art man has ever thought to represent himself," including clay, paint, and cloth, is "a kind of map of life" as it exists in the county; yet, according to Calvin, "'map' is such a poor word for such a wondrous thing."<sup>1</sup> In his review for the *Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley proclaimed Jones's first and only novel to date "extraordinary" and "the best new work of American fiction to cross my desk in years."<sup>2</sup> The novel was honored with a National Book Critics Circle Award, a Pulitzer Prize, an IMPAC Dublin award and was a finalist for the National Book Award. In 2004, Jones was also awarded a fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, known informally as a "genius grant."<sup>3</sup>

For Yardley, as for many subsequent reviewers, the historical reality at the core of the novel, the fact that some free blacks owned black slaves, is "one of the most peculiar anomalies of that endlessly provocative and troubling subject."<sup>4</sup> The existence of this small population of black slaveholders made

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<sup>1</sup> Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (New York: Amistad, 2003), 384. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Known World*.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Yardley, "A New Novel Charts Some Unpredictable Relations of Race and Power in the Antebellum South," Book World, *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2003, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>3</sup> Dinitia Smith, "National Book Award Nominations," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2003, LexisNexis Academic; Linton Weeks, "'Known World' Author Among 23 MacArthur Grant Winners," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2004, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>4</sup> Yardley, "A New Novel Charts Some Unpredictable Relations of Race and Power in the Antebellum South."

a lasting impression on Jones when he first read about them in college. “Most people in America think of slavery only in terms of black or white, slave or slaveholder,” Jones told an interviewer. “So this was shocking to come across. And it must have been making a space for itself in my brain, because when I started looking around to write a novel, there it was.”<sup>5</sup> Literary scholar Trudier Harris has suggested that though *The Known World* was published as a novel, it is really a series of vignettes, perhaps not surprising for an author whose other book-length works are the critically acclaimed short story collections *Lost in the City* and *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*. Jonathan Yardley similarly noted that *The Known World* lacks plot in a traditional sense, as well as a central character, because the central character is slavery.<sup>6</sup> In a book that takes its title from a three-hundred-year-old woodcut map of the world and the heading carved above its legend, the composition that awes Calvin Newman in the final chapter also serves as something of a cypher for the preceding text, a visual counterpart to the novel itself. What Jones achieves in *The Known World* is “a kind of map of life,” one that captures the complex class and power relationships of a slaveholding society.<sup>7</sup>

The small cadre of black slaveowners, including the Newmans, their former teacher Fern Elston, and Caldonia’s first husband Henry Townsend co-exist not only with the people they hold in slavery, but also with the county’s wealthiest white planter, William Robbins; poor white patrollers who harass the county’s free blacks; and a sheriff who, despite forswearing slave ownership, preserves the institution with his efforts to deter and pursue runaways. Like the artist of the wall hanging, Jones creates the world of Manchester County from all manner of material. Beyond the experience of his characters, he cites stories and rumors residents relay among themselves, official county and census

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<sup>5</sup> Jerome Weeks, “The Road Less Traveled; When Edward P. Jones was Down and Out, His Gift for Writing was there to Save Him,” *The Dallas (TX) Morning News* October 6, 2003, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>6</sup> Yardley, “A New Novel Charts Some Unpredictable Relations of Race and Power in the Antebellum South.”

<sup>7</sup> Referring to the artwork described in the final pages, Janet Maslin similarly suggests, “The author’s viewpoint has the same effect in this book.” Janet Maslin, “His Brother’s Keeper In Antebellum Virginia,” *Books of the Times, New York Times*, August 14, 2003, LexisNexis Academic.

records, imagined works of twentieth scholarship that chronicle the history of the county, even Calvin's letter. Often, Jones draws on earlier novels and non-fiction narratives of slavery. His chapter headings follow the style of antebellum slave narratives, while the story of a slave mailed to freedom in a shipping container evokes the narrative of Henry "Box" Brown. The Canadian pamphleteer who interviews Fern Elston vaguely recalls Adam Nehemiah, the villain of Sherley Williams's *Dessa Rose*. The compassion Celeste shows for Moses at the end of the novel by having her children deliver his meals is reminiscent of the philosophy of forgiveness Vvry Brown espouses at the end of *Jubilee*. Some reviewers have suggested general similarities between Jones's novel and Faulkner's oeuvre, between the Counties of Yoknapatawpha and Manchester; but resonating throughout *The Known World* are very distinct echoes of *Absalom, Absalom!*<sup>8</sup> Yet even as Jones incorporates elements of these earlier texts into his larger narrative collage, the result is an innovative novel that reshapes the popular perception of slavery's race and class politics—what one writer aptly characterized as "an aching and lyrical exploration of moral complexities."<sup>9</sup>

*The Known World* begins on the evening of Henry Townsend's death in 1855. His passing and the events that immediately follow provide the temporal anchor for the novel, though Jones shifts back and forth in time with a narrator whose knowledge is temporally boundless. In this way, the author reveals a "history of eons" and a fact that the bondswoman Delphie does not know about herself; approaching her forty-fourth birthday, Delphie has already lived longer than every one of her ancestors (*The Known World*, 62). Jones also offers glimpses of a distant future. In the novel's early pages, Elias

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<sup>8</sup> For comparisons to Faulkner, see Linton Weeks "A True World of His Own Invention: Edward P. Jones's First Novel May Put Him on the Literary Map," *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2003, LexisNexis Academic; Yardley, "A New Novel Charts Some Unpredictable Relations of Race and Power in the Antebellum South;" Weeks, "The Road Less Traveled;" Neely Tucker, "The Known World of Edward P. Jones: the Pulitzer-Prize-Winning Author may be the most Celebrated Writer Washington Has Ever Produced. He also may be the Most Enigmatic," *The Washington Post*, sec. MAGAZINE, November 15, 2009; LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel L. Swarns, "Hard Times Propel Two Novelists Along the Road to Recognition," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2003, LexisNexis Academic.

carves a doll for his daughter that Tessie has with her when she dies at ninety-seven (*Known World*, 67). As often happens in his recounting of the past or previewing the distant future, Jones first offers a limited narration, then returns to the account at least once to provide fuller detail with subsequent retellings. He returns to the story of an elderly Tessie when Fern Elston compliments the child's doll. "My Daddy made it for me," the little girl replies. According to Jones, Tessie would utter the same words before she died; on that day, her father would be on her mind all morning, and she would ask one of her great-grandchildren to retrieve the doll from the attic (*Known World*, 350).

Despite the remarkably rich detail of *The Known World*, Jones says he did no research. Though he amassed a collection of books on slavery, he rarely read past the first or second chapters. "I'd always intended to read up on it," Jones explains, "but even as I was intending to do research, I was also creating my characters, and before long I had a whole book up in my head, knew the final chapter and exactly how the story would resolve itself."<sup>10</sup> Jones, a graduate of Holy Cross College studied creative writing at the University of Virginia, where he earned a Master's of Fine Arts.<sup>11</sup> His first book, the 1992 short story collection *Lost in the City* was a finalist for the National Book Award. For almost a decade, even as he mentally plotted *The Known World*, Jones put off writing in part, he says, because he felt obligated to read the scholarship before he wrote the novel.<sup>12</sup> At the end of 2001, he decided he had waited long enough and took a five week vacation from his regular job summarizing tax articles for a financial trade journal. When he sat down to write *The Known World*, Jones already had the first six pages of the first chapter—beginning with the overseer Moses on the evening of Henry Townsend's

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<sup>10</sup> Q and A, "Edward P. Jones," Book World, *Washington Post*, August 24, 2003, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>11</sup> Weeks, "A True World of His Own Invention."

<sup>12</sup> Philip Kennicott, "Grim Chapters, Winningly Told; Slavery and the Soviet Union Dominate Arts Pulitzers," *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2004, LexisNexis Academic.

death—and the first six pages of the last chapter, which contains Calvin’s letter.<sup>13</sup> After he returned to work in January 2002, he was notified that he had lost his job of nineteen years in a round of layoffs. Forging ahead with the novel, he wrote five pages a day and finished a draft in two-and-a half months.<sup>14</sup>

Of the many people who populate his novel, Jones explains, “The sky for them is not a very high sky, and so they can’t stand up on their own two feet. They are sort of stooped. You know, it’s that sort of world.”<sup>15</sup> Jones uses much the same language when he speaks of his mother. Born in rural Virginia around 1916, Jeanette Jones worked most of her youth as a field laborer and, according to her son, never completed more than a grade or two. When Jones’s father abandoned his wife and three children, his mother supported the family washing dishes and cleaning floors at the French restaurant Chez Francois and working as a maid in the Claridge Hotel in Washington.<sup>16</sup> “What I know about her,” Jones says of his mother, “is that all she could handle was...caring for her two children and going to work every day. My mother, she couldn’t read or write. So her world, her sky didn’t rise very high.”<sup>17</sup>

When Jones was about four or five years old, his younger brother, born with developmental disabilities, was removed from his mother’s custody. In a 2003 interview, Jones recounted how his mother received a fateful letter that the author has kept all these years: “The city government was saying that my brother, being feeble-minded—that’s the phrase in there—that they [were] going to take him and put him in an institution. And my mother had to run around and find someone [to read the

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<sup>13</sup> Q and A, “Edward P. Jones,” Book World, *Washington Post*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; Oprah Winfrey, host, “How My Worst Moment made Me a Star; Guests Discuss How Hitting Rock Bottom Made Them a Stronger, Better Person,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, September 9, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> “Author Edward P. Jones Talks about His First Novel, ‘The Known World,’” transcript of interview by Martha Woodroof, *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio (NPR), October 28, 2003, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>16</sup> Q and A, “Edward P. Jones,” Book World, *Washington Post*.

<sup>17</sup> “Edward P. Jones Discusses His Novel, the Known World,” transcript of interview by Barbara Bogaev, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio (NPR), November 11, 2003, LexisNexis Academic.

letter]. And I can remember standing on those steps after the guy read it, and she just started crying.”<sup>18</sup> In his 2005 essay, “In the Name of the Mother,” Jones recalls how his mother, “collapsed on the stairs in an uncontrollable rush of tears.”<sup>19</sup>

His mother’s life and, ultimately, her death are subjects that never seem far Jones’s thoughts. In many ways, they have defined the writer. In the essay “A Sunday Portrait,” included in the collection *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, Jones describes a photograph taken of his mother as a young woman and imagines what he might have said to her if he, with the foreknowledge of how her life would unfold, might have met her the day the portrait was taken. Sent to him by a family member about a month after his mother’s death, the photograph represents unfulfilled possibilities, a moment when his mother’s life could have taken a different course. Had he the power, Jones declares, he would have met his mother at the photographer’s studio and warned her not to marry his father, though it would have meant condemning himself, his siblings, and his nieces and nephews to “some universe of never-to-be-born beings.” “Save yourself...save us all,” Jones would have told her and encouraged the young woman who would become his mother to “go off and see as much of the world as she could, come back, and then go off and see it all over again.”<sup>20</sup> In another essay, published almost a decade later, Jones reveals his mother’s unfulfilled dream of visiting the Holy Land. She talked of a pilgrimage, he writes, “the way a slave woman 300 years ago might have spoken about traipsing about in a place that did not know slavery.”<sup>21</sup> In *The Known World*, Jones’s characters have a habit of not reaching their destinations. The gambler Jebediah Dickinson settles before he reaches Baltimore. Philomena Cartwright dreams of living in Richmond, but after two failed excursions she

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Edward P. Jones, “In the Name of the Mother,” *Essence*, December 2005, 142, EBSCO MasterFILE Premier (19526609).

<sup>20</sup> Edward P. Jones, “A Sunday Portrait,” in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co, 1994), 38. A version of this essay also appeared as Edward P. Jones, “Words for My Mother,” *The Washington Post*, May 8, 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, “In the Name of the Mother,” 140.

arrives too late to enjoy the grandeur of a city reduced to ashes by the Civil War. Intrigued by a photograph of a family who lives there, Calvin Newman longs to travel to New York but never reaches the city. In language that anticipates his dedication of *The Known World*, Jones in “A Sunday Portrait” admits that he is “haunted by the photograph” of his mother. He also worries that he was “not the best of sons,” and writes that “in the end I fear that too much of what she saw of the world was the bottom of a soap-filled dirty pot.”<sup>22</sup> Jones contrasts the portrait of his mother as a young woman with a second photograph taken in 1974, when she received radiation therapy as a patient at George Washington University hospital. She was fifty-seven years old at the time. Between the two photos, she had lived a lifetime of hardship. By the time of the second photograph, she had survived several strokes and was dying of lung cancer.<sup>23</sup>

In “In the Name of My Mother,” Jones writes of yet another photograph taken on the day he graduated from college. In the graduation photo, Jones’s mother—her arm “folded and frozen at her side” as the result of a stroke—wears “a kind of smile.” Through second-hand accounts, Jones learned that as his mother and sister traveled that morning by car from where they had spent the night, when the college campus came into view, his mother began to cry. He imagines that morning as the counterpoint to the awful day years earlier when his mother learned her youngest child would be taken from her and institutionalized because government bureaucrats considered her unable to care for him. As he recalls her tearful collapse on the stairs, the sense of helplessness the author ascribes to his mother is also evident in Jones’s narrated child self, who does not register the reactions of his siblings or the man who reads the letter; he simply watches his devastated parent. The author seems just as haunted by the memory of that moment as by the photograph of his mother as a young woman. For his father, who died within months of his mother, the author says he did not grieve. Elsewhere, Jones says he considers

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<sup>22</sup> Jones, “A Sunday Portrait,” 38.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 37.

the father's unmarked grave a testament to the man's failure to provide even basic necessities for his children.<sup>24</sup> Thirty years later, Jones says he still cannot conceive of a time when he will agree with the cemetery office worker who seemed to think it was his duty as a son to provide a marker for his father. "I see my mother alone with us on those stairs," writes Jones, "and I say no in my mind all over again."<sup>25</sup>

Jones recalls his childhood mainly as a series of moves—twenty-five by the time he turned eighteen. Most of the places his mother could afford were already dilapidated when the family moved in, and usually, not long afterward, some final calamity would render the dwellings uninhabitable. In the autobiographical essay "Moving Pictures: In Search of Summers Past," as Jones relates his experience at each residence, the catalog of Washington addresses his family briefly occupied serves as the story's narrative structure and the organizing principle of Jones's early life. Having lived "so many places," the author reflects, "my life is fractured into innumerable pieces, the way it is not for people who lived in one place or a few places during their childhoods." "Moving Pictures," published in 1994, demonstrates the flash-forward technique Jones would later employ in *The Known World*. He begins the story in the summer of his thirteenth year, on the day he sets out in search of old friends from whom he has been separated by his relocation and theirs. His bike ride through the city becomes a journey of memory, as the author mentally revisits each of his previous homes. The count has reached nineteen this summer, and the bike young Edward's mother has purchased with more than a month's salary—paid in installments—will be stolen in a few months when the family moves again.<sup>26</sup> Thirteen year-old Edward cannot make friends now, the author explains, "because my heart is unable to take it anymore, unable to extend itself, knowing that in a few months or a year we will move again and the friends will

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, "A Sunday Portrait," 39.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, "In the Name of the Mother," 142.

<sup>26</sup> Edward P. Jones, "Moving Pictures: In Search of Summers Past," *Washington Post*, August 7, 1994, LexisNexis Academic.



be lost and I will have to start over.” On the day of his summer bike ride, the three boys Edward hopes to find are the White brothers, his best friends from his previous home, where he lived from 1961-1964—the longest of any residence Jones recounts. “With so much time here my heart sets down roots,” the author explains, and when his family finally leaves, it is that move, writes Jones, “that finally pulls me apart.” Young Edward has heard through word of mouth the general neighborhood where his old friends have since moved, but with “only a vague address and a heart that his breaking” the thirteen-year-old eventually realizes he will not find the White brothers. Years later, the author meets the boys’ uncle at a bus stop and learns that one of them has “turned out ‘bad.’” The encounter is unsettling to Jones, who explains, “It is as if he [the uncle] is lying, or talking about someone I never knew, and I resent him.”<sup>27</sup> The final address the author relates is the apartment on Massachusetts Ave., where Jones moves with his mother in 1970, a place she will be safe while he is away at Holy Cross.<sup>28</sup> He does not say so in the story, but this is also where he would return after graduation and stay until after his mother’s death on New Year’s Day, 1975.<sup>29</sup>

## Family

*The Known World* is especially concerned with fatherhood and the contending force of slaveholder paternalism. The strong familial relationships Jones depicts for Celeste, Elias, and their children, contrast with figures like Stamford, who endures “a kind of mourning” for the parents whose names he only recalls after much effort (*Known World*, 193). The last glimpse of an aged Tessie requesting the doll her father crafts for her in the novel’s opening pages occurs just lines before the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Weeks, “A True World of His Own Invention.”

final mention of her stillborn baby sister, whom her mother Celeste delivers early when the overseer Moses forces her to work in the fields, though she is unwell. Before the burial, Elias asks for a lock of the infant's hair, which he wraps in a piece of cloth and pins to the inside of his shirt. Elias's parental devotion and the aged Tessie's memory of him differ dramatically from the overseer Moses, who is known to abuse his wife and son before their mysterious disappearance, for which Moses is responsible.

In *The Known World*, infants—eleven of them counting Celeste and Elias's baby—far outnumber adults in the Townsend slave cemetery. In Henry's short time as master, the adult bondspeople have not yet begun to die off, with two exceptions. One man was run over by horses. Another woman who "fell asleep" and "never woke up" passed out on an empty stomach after fourteen hours of fieldwork (*Known World*, 70). The comparatively high infant mortality can be traced to some natural causes. One child was unable to digest milk. Another died of infection from a burn. But when the woman who usually watched him fell ill, one baby boy was taken to work by his mother and died strapped to her back as she worked in the field. Luke, the sweet-natured boy Celeste and Elias adopt, is the only child in the cemetery who survived passed infancy. Against Elias's pleas to be sent in his place, eleven-year-old Luke was rented out for two dollars a week at a nearby farm, where he was literally worked to death. Among the known causes of death for the Townsend slaves, Jones associates the fatalities, particularly of children, with the physically depleting work of a labor system that consumes the lives and bodies of the enslaved.

The black slaveholder Henry Townsend was bought out of slavery by his father, Augustus. A skilled woodworker and furniture maker, Augustus was permitted by his owner, William Robbins, to hire himself out. According to the arrangement, Robbins kept a portion of the earnings as Augustus's master and collected the rest toward Augustus's purchase of himself. At twenty-two, Augustus bought his own freedom. Henry was nine when Augustus bought the manumission of his wife Mildred and the

departure of two free parents left their son alone as Williams's property. By then, Henry could no longer remember his father being part of their household. Rita, the woman who had shared a cabin with Mildred and her son began to care for Henry in his mother's absence (*Known World*, 16). What follows in the years before Mildred and Augustus can fulfill their promise to bring Henry home demonstrates the competing claims of authority and affection between the parents of enslaved children and the men and women who owned them as property. Other than making payments to Robbins to purchase their son, Mildred and Augustus are forbidden to cross onto Robbins's land. Though Jones does not say so explicitly, white masters generally considered free blacks a threat to the authority of slaveholders. Their very presence of African Americans who were not legally bound to a master contradicted the entire racialized system of slavery and, slaveholders feared, might incite resistance among the enslaved.<sup>30</sup> Henry repeatedly fails to meet Mildred and Augustus on the road, but as Robbins's property, he remains beyond his parents' discipline. On the day he keeps them waiting two hours past their designated meeting time, Augustus shakes his son and pushes him to the ground. The next Sunday, the Townsends find Robbins waiting for them. Asserting his right of chattel ownership over their claim of parental authority, Robbins declares, "I won't have you touching my boy, my property," then punishes the parents by forbidding them to visit Henry for a month (*Known World*, 19).

With each meeting, Mildred provisions her son with small delicacies to supplement the typical slave diet of fatback pork, ashcake, and greens. Through these small gifts of food, Mildred conveys maternal affection. Her intention that Henry share the treats with his friends also suggests a way to facilitate social, perhaps affective, exchange during the long stretches of time the child is separated from his family. Instead, Henry uses his mother's gifts as a different form of currency and bribes his way to becoming Robbins's groom. He pledges these small feasts to his predecessor, who in turn convinces Robbins that Henry would be better in the position than the ultimate beneficiary of Mildred's

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<sup>30</sup> Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 270.

provisions. Once in Robbins's orbit, Henry soon earns his master's favor, first as a groom and then as a shoemaker who returns even after manumission to make footwear for Robbins's guests. In winter, the sight of his groom, "shivering in ... the rags he tied around his feet" compels Robbins to order that the boy be clothed in proper attire and allowed to take his meals in the kitchen with the house slaves. In the plantation hierarchy, house slaves generally found better material circumstances than field laborers. As Mildred's food buys her son's admission into the highest class of slaves, Henry trades the parental affection the food represents for Robbins's favor and a seat in the master's kitchen. As a young adult, Henry continues his social ascension with Robbins as the benefactor who sells him his first parcel of land and his first slave, Moses. Robbins also acts as Henry's agent in his acquisition of bondspeople. Henry's slave ownership provokes a physical blow and a broken shoulder from Augustus and initiates a decade-long estrangement. As he sacrifices filial affection for Robbins's paternalism a second time, Henry achieves the rank of master.

Henry's rise to mastery recalls the story of self-making from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* After buying his first parcel of land and his first slave from Robbins, Henry sets about building a house two stories high and half as large as Robbins's mansion. When that house is half-built, Robbins rides upon the scene of Henry wrestling with Moses and reprimands his protégé. He tells Henry that the law will stand behind him as a master but warns, "If you roll around and be a playmate to your property, and your property turns round and bites you, the law will come to you still, but it will not come with the full heart and all the deliberate speed that you will need." By Robbins's reasoning, "You will have failed in your part of the bargain. You will have pointed to the line that separates you from your property and told your property that the line does not matter" (*Known World*, 123). Through his acquisition of real estate and human property as well his marriage to Caldonia, Henry joins Manchester County's small population of free black slaveowners. The emphasis on house building, the physical combat with Moses, marriage to an educated free wife, and the want of a son that Henry thinks might

temper his father's disapproval all recall the story of Thomas Sutpen. Unlike the poor mountain yeoman, Henry rises from the ranks of the enslaved with the planter Robbins as his patron, yet Jones endows Henry with the same myopic vision that plagues Faulkner's self-made planter. Just as Sutpen searches in vain for the flaw in his design, not realizing the design itself is the mistake, Henry aspires to be a better master than any white slave owner but fails to comprehend that "the kind of world he wanted to create was doomed before he had even spoken the first syllable of the word *master*" (*Known World*, 64).

In his retelling of the Faulknerian saga in which Sutpen disavows his first wife and eldest son, Jones's Moses, the man over whom Henry Townsend first gains mastery and who wields authority as overseer, plots to gain his freedom and ascend to Henry's former position by initiating a sexual relationship with his newly widowed mistress. Moses fails in his design, but not before sending his own wife and son to freedom, so that he can be free to marry Caldonia. Both Henry and Moses seek to overcome their own enslavement by rising to the position of master and enslaving others, much as Thomas Sutpen retaliates for Pettibone's insult by reproducing the slave hierarchy with himself as the slaveowner patriarch. The house that Henry and Moses build is a monument to Henry's mastery, so much so that during his infrequent visits, Augustus refuses to stay in the house built and supported by slave labor. Instead, Augustus and Mildred choose to spend the night in a slave cabin. Henry's concern with his dwelling assumes a spiritual significance when he dies of an unidentified illness. In his death dream, Henry, who had admired Satan's declaration in *Paradise Lost* that he would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven, finds himself the tenant of "the tiniest of houses." He is aware that he does not own the house and is dissatisfied that he was promised a thousand rooms but finds fewer than four, so cramped that he scrapes the ceiling (*Known World*, 11). After Henry's death, Moses ingratiates himself to Caldonia by telling made-up stories about his early days with Henry and how, even then, Henry had intended to marry Caldonia and built the house with her in mind.

Another Faulknerian moment occurs as the free black teacher and slave owner Fern Elston visits Robbins to complain that she has been mistreated by the patrollers. Not permitted to approach the front door, she sends a slave around to the back with a message for Robbins to meet her, so that she does not suffer the indignity herself (*Known World*, 131). Similarly, when Fern agrees to accept Henry Townsend as her student and designates the time he should make himself available for lessons, Jones notes that Fern specifically does not say that Robbins should relay the message; for a man of Robbins's station to carry messages between two people who are not his social equals would be an insult. With these important exchanges, Jones reveals how citizens of Manchester County observe the customs of class divisions in a more nuanced version of "that line" between masters and slaves, about which Robbins lectures Henry.

In addition to the younger Townsends, Manchester's cohort of black slaveowners includes Robbins's children Dora and Louis—who later marries Caldonia—and their teacher Fern Elston, who was born free and owns twelve slaves with her first husband. Though Fern, whom Jones describes as "white as any white person" refuses to "pass," her siblings and several cousins choose to do just that (*Known World*, 130). Occasionally these relatives wire bank deposits, which Fern understands as hush money. In truth, Fern has no intention of revealing their secret, but suggesting yet another way in which slavery alienates families, Fern ceases to think of her passing relatives as "people who had the same blood as hers" (*Known World*, 132). When the Canadian pamphlet writer Anderson Frazier comes to interview her in 1881, Fern disputes Frazier's supposition that for a black master to have owned slaves must have been like owning one's family. "We owned slaves," she tells him. "It was what was done, and so that is what we did" (*Known World*, 109). In the 1850s, at a dinner hosted by Caldonia and attended by Dora and Louis Cartwright, Fern declares, "I realized all over again that if I were in bondage I would slash my master's throat on the first day. I wonder why they all have not risen up and done that" (*Known World*, 288). As the dinner conversation turns to the possibility of a war of "slaves

against masters,” Fern asserts, “The only question for us, around this blessed table,”—meaning most, if not all, of Manchester’s black slaveowners—“is which side we should choose.” Fern admits that in her “feeble way,” she believes she had already chosen her side: “I do not think I would fare very well as a dressmaker’s apprentice. ‘Yessum’ and ‘Yessuh’ do not come easily from my mouth. My hands, my body, they fear the dirt of the field” (*Known World*, 289). Anderson Frazier’s assumptions about the experience of slaveholding for black masters inherently presumes that they identified with their slaves, but Fern’s comments at Caldonia’s dinner suggest the way in which she and other members of the black slaveholding class seek to distinguish themselves from black bondspeople and to identify with other slaveowners, most of whom are white.

With dinners such as this, Jones also demonstrates the class protocol for social gatherings. While the black slaveholders of Manchester County socialize with other black slaveholders, Jones offers a broader view of the social customs with the visits of Sherriff Skiffington and his wife Winifred throughout the county. Aside from their understanding that Minerva is excluded from Cousin Clara Martin’s dinner invitation, Jones explains, “If they stayed with a family of means similar to their own, the supper might include couples from the same class and perhaps one, but generally only one from William Robbins’s class. They also stayed with people in Robbins’s sphere, but when they dined with them, Skiffington and Winifred were the lone representatives of their class. As for the class that produced the patrollers, they were a hand-to-mouth people and invitations to anywhere were very rare” (*Known World*, 148).

One reason for Robbins’s attention toward Henry Townsend is Henry’s potential as a social connection for Robbins’s children with former slave Philomena Cartwright. When he first saw Philomena, who was then fourteen years old, Robbins already had two biological slave children with a bondswoman who lived on his plantation. Revealed as an offhand detail in the larger story of Philomena, this one and only reference to Robbins’s slave progeny nevertheless illustrates the reality

that, as Frederick Douglass once explained, the slaveholder “*may be, and often is, master and father to the same child.*”<sup>31</sup> Six months after beginning a sexual relationship with Philomena, the married Robbins installs his young mistress in her own house with a slave maid. At Philomena’s request, Robbins buys her mother and brother and later her friend Sophie, whose grand tales of Richmond fuel Philomena’s dream of going to the city from the time she is eight years old. On Philomena’s sixteenth birthday, Robbins grants her freedom and eventually gives her ownership of the three companions, two of whom—the brother and Sophie—eventually run away. Though Robbins feels that he “loved [Philomena] far more than anything he could name,” the resurgence of her Richmond fantasy after the birth of their second child and the excursions that end with her being hauled back to Manchester suggest their relationship as a continued form of bondage for Philomena, with Richmond as her failed escape. After Philomena’s first departure, Robbins dispatches his overseer to “fetch her” (*Known World*, 116). The response eerily parallels his earlier effort to reclaim two runaway slaves, the brother and Sophie, who, Jones implies, disappear with the full blessing of their mistress. The second time Philomena flees to Richmond, this time with the children in tow, Robbins pursues them himself. “I don’t wanna go back,” Philomena pleads. In the end, Robbins punches her in the face so hard that he fractures her jaw. The author narrates Robbins’s ardor for Philomena, just as he writes that the planter “came to develop a kind of love” for Henry. Jones does not dispute the sincerity of the master’s feeling but exposes the jaw-breaking perversity of slaveholder love. In Henry’s case, the cost of the master’s affection proves quite literal, as Robbins factors his own emotional attachment into the boy’s market value and increases the price he charges Augustus for Henry’s freedom.

In a related case, Sheriff John Skiffington and his wife Winifred fancy themselves adoptive parents to the nine-year-old slave girl Minerva, whom they receive as a wedding present from the sheriff’s cousin. Though neither spouse wants any connection to slavery, the possibility that Minerva

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<sup>31</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 14.



might be bought by a cruel master rules out the possibility of sale. Over and over, Jones reiterates that the Skiffingtons do not think of Minerva as their property. They do not believe they own her as their neighbors own slaves. As Jones explains, “She did serve, charged with cleaning the house, sharing the job of cooking the meals with Winifred. But they would not have called her a servant. Had she been able to walk away from them, knew north from south and east from west, Skiffington and Winifred would have gone after her, but it would not have been the way he and his patrollers would pursue an escaped slave. A child would have been lost and so parents do what must be done” (*Known World*, 166). Yet when the Skiffingtons visit Winifred’s cousin Clara, they leave Minerva at home, since “everyone knew who was included in a supper invitation and who was not” (*Known World*, 149). Other white residents of Manchester County regard Minerva in the dehumanizing light of a “pet” to the sheriff and his spouse. To the Skiffingtons, Minerva occupies the ambiguous place of “a daughter and yet not a daughter,” a reality starkly illustrated just before her fifteenth birthday, when John Skiffington glimpses Minerva dressing in her room and begins to think of her sexually. He ultimately decides that “God would abandon him if he took Minerva,” but wonders if he would entertain such thoughts about a biological daughter (*Known World* 308, 339).

Years later in Philadelphia, a chance meeting reunites Minerva with the older sister from whom slavery had separated her. Winifred, desperate to locate the “daughter” who has seemingly vanished, uses what little money she has to print posters with a daguerreotype portrait and description of Minerva. The caption reads, “Lost Or Harmed In Some Unknown Way On The Streets Of This City—A Precious Loved One.” At the bottom of the page, almost as an afterthought, are the words that doom Winifred’s efforts: “Will answer to the name Minnie.” Winifred, Jones writes, “meant only love with all the words,” but her intent remains unclear. Is she attempting to locate a lost child or reclaim a runaway slave? As a daughter who is also not a daughter, Minerva remains legally Winifred’s property. Though a photograph of Minerva replaces what was usually a woodcut stereotype, Winifred’s posters

eerily imitate the form of fugitive slave bills, like those Robbins posts for Sophia and Philomena's brother. Minerva refuses any further contact with Winifred, not even to explain her decision to remain with her sister. As Jones makes clear, it is the language of "will answer to" that seals her determination; it is the same phrase Belle Skiffington spoke years earlier when she presented Minerva as a wedding present to her new cousin.

The fictive kinship the Skiffingtons imagine between themselves and Minerva, like Robbins's affection for Henry, interferes with Minerva's filial ties to her own family. As John Skiffington considers the girl sexually, his thoughts—which he never acts upon—reframes his self-described fatherly relation to something more akin to Robbins's objectification of Philomena, but with incestuous overtones. While Winifred may have "loved Minerva more than she loved any other human being in the world," the well-intentioned couple and the slave who is like a daughter but not a daughter demonstrate once again that however sincere the slaveholders' claims of affection, the sentiment is ultimately perverted by the power dynamics of slavery (*Known World*, 382 ). More often than not, that emotion is also unrequited, as is the case with Minerva and Philomena, who attempt to remove themselves from the masters who "love" them.

## **Resistance**

In 1837, five slaves ran away. Two days later the posse led by Sheriff Gilly Patterson apprehended the fugitives in the swamp. The owner had four of the runaways hobbled by slicing their Achilles tendons. The fifth runaway, Jesse, was shot in the swamp where he was found. He was decapitated and his head placed on a post in front of his cabin as a warning to the owner's other slaves. Jesse's murder was ruled a "justifiable homicide." Though traveling in the opposite direction, the fugitives were found less than a mile from the home of a white widow and her two teenage daughters,

and “No white person wanted to imagine what would have happened if those five slaves had doubled back heading south and away from freedom” (*Known World*, 26). The anxiety probably stemmed at least in part from the 1831 slave rebellion led by Nat Turner, which occurred only six years earlier in Southampton County.

Many white residents are still anxious about reports of slave “restlessness” from other places. What Northerners called “slave uprisings,” Virginia slaveholders “preferred to characterize as ‘a family squabble,’ instigated by unknowns not part of the family” (*Known World*, 147-148). Among these anxious masters is Winifred’s cousin Clara Martin, who receives a report from another relative about a neighbor whose slave cook Epetha, raised by the neighbor from childhood, was caught adding ground-up glass to her mistress’s food. After reading the report, Clara begins to fear her own slave Ralph and tells Sherriff Skiffington, “I just don’t know what I would do if Ralph ended up murdering me” (*Known World*, 163). Though she has been eating Ralph’s cooking for nearly a quarter-century and barely knows anything of the culinary arts, from then on Clara only eats food she prepares. For all of her anxiety, indicative of the volatility of master-slave relationships, Clara and Ralph live together another twenty-one years, even after the Civil War makes Ralph a free man. When he talks of leaving, Clara cries and says her place would not be the same without him. On the morning Clara is found dead, presumably of natural causes, her bedroom door must be forced open, where she has nailed it shut every night for years (*Known World*, 164).

At the time of Henry’s death, Fern and Caldonia do not immediately notice his passing; they are discussing the case of a white mistress, Elizabeth Marson, who was put to work by her slaves after her husband’s death. According to the story, which has taken more than a year to reach Manchester County, the slaves, Mirtha and Destiny, “[took] over and kept the woman prisoner for months, working her ragged with only a few hours rest each day until her hair turned white and her pores sweated blood.” Conflicting accounts report that Mirtha and Destiny have either been “killed by the law” or

sold “to try to compensate Elizabeth.” Whatever the case, Jones writes of Elizabeth, “When [she] was finally rescued, she did not remember that she was supposed to be the owner, and it was a long time before she could be taught that again” (*Known World*, 11). Though the extent of their punishment remains uncertain, Mirtha and Destiny achieve a temporary social reversal in which they assume the status of mistress and effectively enslave Elizabeth. The repetition of the story suggests an anxiety among slaveholders. Mirtha and Destiny resist their own bondage in a way that also demonstrates the tenuousness of the owner’s power. Elizabeth is conditioned to be subservient to the women she legally owns and must later re-learn her role as mistress. The entire episode demonstrates the arbitrary nature of master-slave relations, as both slavery and mastery are shown to be learned behaviors.

Other resistance takes a less overt form, like Alice’s feigned insanity, which affords her less restricted movements from the time she arrives at Henry’s farm. The story Alice tells about herself—so vividly that no one thinks to doubt its veracity—is that a mule had “kicked her in the head and sent all common sense flying out of her.” In truth, mules “terrified” Alice’s former master, who refused to have the animals or even books about them anywhere near him. Perhaps because mules had stricken such fear in her former owner, Alice chooses one as the instrument of her feigned madness, which enables her to behave in way that “sometimes made the hair on the backs of the slave patrollers’ necks stand up” (*Known World*, 12). According to Jones,

She spit at and slapped their horses for saying untrue things about her to her neighbors, especially to Elias’s youngest, “a little bitty boy” she told the patrollers she planned to marry after the harvest. She grabbed the patrollers’ crotches and begged them to dance away with her because her intended was forever pretending he didn’t know who she was. She called the white men by made-up names and gave them the day and time God would take them to heaven, would drag each and every member of their families across the sky and toss them into hell with no more thought than a woman dropping strawberries into a cup of cream (*Known World*, 12).

In all of these things, Alice is excused for her blatant insubordination, which is presumed to be the result of the mule kick. In a reality known only to Alice and Moses, who eventually divines her secret, Alice cleverly rebels against these repressive figures of authority by masking her resistance in the guise

of insanity. Eventually, her presence becomes so routine that the patrollers virtually ignore her night-wandering.

Alice also constantly chants and sings ditties like, “I met a dead man layin in Massah lane/ Ask that dead man what his name/ He raised he bony head and took off his hat/ He told me this, he told me that.” Ostensibly another symptom of her head injury, to Alice these nonsensical songs are prayers for freedom. Though she worries “the angels might not understand what she was chanting with this overseer as a witness,” she ventures, “Maybe if she lifted her arms now, they would reward her for all the singing in the past and raise her up to freedom” (*Known World*, 293). The song Alice sings most often, about a man who rises from the dead to talk to the singer, enacts the notion of freedom as rising from the social death of slavery. Alice’s feigned madness eventually provides the perfect alibi to do just that. Per Moses’s instruction, Alice runs away and carries Priscilla and Jamie with her to freedom. Sherriff Skiffington suspects Moses of murder but never entertains the slightest notion that the three unlikely rebels have liberated themselves from bondage.

A more literal instance of slave resurrection occurs with the liberation of Rita, the woman who cares for Henry when Mildred leaves the Robbins plantation. On the day of Henry’s manumission, Rita walks the boy to the road to meet his parents and impulsively runs after the Townsends’ wagon, entreating them not to leave her behind. Henry, who later becomes a slaveholder, clings to Rita and pleads her case to Mildred and Augustus. In this urgent appeal, Augustus notes, his son addresses him as “Daddy” more than he has in the previous three years. Later recalling that Henry told Robbins about the shoving incident, Augustus realizes that if his involvement in Rita’s escape ever comes to light, Henry will be the first to betray him. Henry never does. After harboring Rita for two days, Augustus devises a plan to usher her safely beyond the reach of Robbins and the local authorities. Reminiscent of the tale of Henry Box Brown, who mailed himself to Philadelphia, Augustus sends Rita to freedom in a shipment of his carved walking sticks. Rita’s first thought when she sees the box that will carry her to

New York is that she is looking at a coffin. Indeed, it could have been, but just as Augustus Townsend's craftsmanship buys his family out of slavery, it also transports Rita safely to freedom.

## America

Rita's disappearance incites an uproar among white slaveholders that compels Gilly Patterson to resign as sheriff. He returns to England, his ancestral homeland, where he takes up sheep farming. When people in England ask about "the possibilities and hope of America," Patterson replies that "all the Americans were running it into the ground and that [America] would be a far better place if it had no Americans" (*Known World*, 41). In Michael Sharra's 1974 novel, *The Killer Angels*, the voices of Buster Kilrain and Arthur Freemantle provide international perspective on the Civil War and slavery. Despite an evident class disparity between the English army officer and the U.S. private of Irish descent, they collectively portray the war and slavery as proof that the country has forsaken its founding principles. In *The Known World*, the mythic vision of America as a land of opportunity is expressed by international figures who have internalized this notion of U.S. national identity, but events of the novel ultimately belie that notion of America.

The wife of the New York merchant who releases Rita from her shipping crate sailed from Ireland four years earlier with her first husband and five children. Only a day into the voyage, the husband died, followed within a month by their infant, Agnes. Mary O'Donnell remarries and has three more children, but she never feels at home in America. She never embraces America as "her own dear country" because she never forgives America for beckoning to her husband and then taking him and the baby from her. What was supposed to be a "land of promise and hope," for Mary O'Donnell, becomes "the cause of all her misery" (*Known World*, 51-52).

After Rita's disappearance leads to John Skiffington's promotion to sheriff, the French

immigrant Jean Broussard is arrested and charged with the murder of his Scandinavian business partner. In the episode from which the novel takes its title, Jones describes the fifteenth century wall map that hangs in the county jail, where Broussard awaits trial. According to the Russian peddler who sold the twelve-piece woodcut to Skiffington, it was the first time the the word “America” appeared on a map. In the age of European exploration and imperialism that predated the U.S. founding, the term “America” had not yet come to represent a mythic Promised Land, as it is understood by Mary O’Donnell’s husband and the prisoner Broussard. By Jones’s account, “The land of North America on the map was smaller than it was in actuality, and where Florida should have been, there was nothing. South America seemed the right size, but it alone of the two continents was called ‘America.’ North America went nameless” (*Known World*, 174). The map is one of several documents that contain errors or inconsistencies. The significantly named Atlas Life, Casualty, and Assurance Company—whose agent seeks to insure Caldonia’s human property against death or injury—has a misspelled letterhead. The 1840 census underreports the geographical area of the county. The census taker also makes arbitrary determinations that result in a baffling ethnic makeup for the Travis family. Though he acknowledges the Native American ancestry of Harvey Travis’s wife and lists her as “American Indian/Full Cherokee,” the census taker regards the couple’s children as “too dark for him and the federal government to consider them as anything else but black;” he lists the children as Travis’s slaves. The census taker, who is also a U.S. marshal, never mentions the children’s white father or Cherokee mother but relies on his “great belief that his government could read between the lines” (*Known World*, 22). The same federal census, laden with inaccuracies, also identifies Robbins’s son Louis as his slave, despite the fact that both Louis and Dora are born after Philomena’s legal manumission and children follow the condition of their mother (*Known World*, 21, 115).

As he awaits trial for killing his business partner, Jean Broussard—also Moses’s former owner—maintains his innocence and declares his confidence that “American justice would ultimately

proclaim it so” (*Known World*, 149). The trial lasts all of one morning. The jury deliberations take part of the afternoon. In his testimony, later recounted by one of the jurors, Broussard “[keeps] repeating that he was a proud and upstanding American citizen and that he would never hurt another proud and upstanding American citizen if he could help it.” Broussard’s attorney, as though premising his entire defense on claims to citizenship, repeats to the jury that the dead man was “not an actual American citizen.” This insistence does not help his client’s case, but the only reason Broussard is found guilty of murder and ultimately hanged, the juror says, is that he has a French accent. Could he have spoken without it, the jury would have accepted the defendant’s story and pronounced him innocent. Instead, Jones writes of the juror’s account, the accent “warped” everything the accused said, including his own name, and gave Broussard “the stench of a dissembler” (*Known World*, 176-177).

For Broussard, as for the O’Donnells and Sherriff Gilly Patterson, America is not so much a geographical location as an ideal that ultimately proves untenable. Broussard’s confidence that he will be rightly exonerated frames his trial as a test of America’s entire system of government and law. Broussard’s perceived otherness overrides his right to a fair trial, and the jury verdict reveals what is truly “warped” is not Broussard’s words but the American justice in which he misplaces so much faith. The juror through whom Jones relates the proceedings does double duty as a merchant and practicing lawyer. As a sometime officer of the court, this juror seems uniquely obligated to insist on a legal basis for the decision or—barring that—to hold out from a unanimous guilty finding, which he recognizes as a miscarriage of the law. Not only is the lawyer complicit in the verdict, if the speed of deliberations is any indication, his effort on behalf of justice is probably nil. Broussard’s trial captures in microcosm the workings of a legal system that not only allows slavery but that likewise fails to protect the legal rights of free men and women.

Once, after the night of jaw-breaking violence, Philomena threatens to leave Robbins and return to Richmond; Robbins retaliates by threatening to sell Philomena back into slavery. When she reminds



him that she has her manumission papers and is a free woman, Robbins declares that “in a world where people believed in a God they could not see and pretended the wind was his voice, paper meant nothing, that it had only the power that he, Robbins, would give it” (*Known World*, 144-45). While his reply confirms Philomena’s situation as a virtual, if not legal, slavery, it also betrays a disturbing truth about the function of law in America. As a white slaveowner and the wealthiest planter in Manchester County, Robbins claims an authority greater than civil law. The power to give law, which Robbins says he has, is traditionally associated with the divine. Novelist E.L. Doctorow has called American republicanism a kind of secular religion, which derives from the consent of the people.<sup>32</sup> The power Robbins claims, not only to defy the civil law but to decide how it selectively applies, is doubly blasphemous. He negates the fundamental concept of America by wresting power from the people and claiming an authority usually reserved for the God he implicitly figures as his only rival for authority.

Even the paternalism he demonstrates toward Henry proves the reach of Robbins’s authority. Despite his building a half-scale mansion and acquiring human property, Henry Townsend remains a slave. When Augustus Townsend buys his son from William Robbins, the sale is registered in the county records. Henry is listed as his father’s property, and according to the letter of the law, that is Henry’s legal status until the day he dies (*Known World*, 16). Whereas Robbins claims the power to revoke the specious “freedom” he has granted Philomena, he takes a youth whom the law still recognizes as a slave and makes him a master in Robbins’s own image. Because of Robbins patronage, no one questions Henry’s acquisition of slaves or remembers that legally Henry is still his father’s property.

If William Robbins represents the planter’s ability to circumvent the law, the case of Jebediah Dickinson demonstrates how the law functions to protect the property rights of slaveholders. Dickinson

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<sup>32</sup> E. L. Doctorow, “A Citizen Reads the Constitution,” *Nation*, February 21, 1987, 212, EBSCO Nation Archives (14137772).

first approaches Fern Elston to collect the \$500 debt he is owed by Fern's gambler husband. When Fern dismisses the claim, Jebediah stations himself outside her house to await Ramsay Elston's return. After nearly two weeks, one of the slave patrollers arrests Jebediah for no apparent reason. When Skiffington wires Jebediah's former master, the minister alleges that the prisoner is not free, as he claims, but that Jebediah forged his freedom papers and borrowed his literary surname from the minister's dead wife, who defied the law by teaching a slave to read and write. As Skiffington upholds the minister's claim, Fern pays \$375 for Jebediah. She intends to grant him freedom to settle Ramsay's debt. But because Jebediah carries news of her husband's infidelities, Fern punishes the messenger by keeping him as her property. As Fern's bondsman, Jebediah is whipped unconscious for making sexually suggestive remarks toward his mistress and suffers a foot amputation after stepping on a nail. All during his enslavement, Jebediah maintains that he is lawfully a free man. The entire situation weighs on Fern, whose worries prompt her remarks about slavery during the gathering of black slaveowners. When she finally does grant Jebediah his freedom, Fern's writing of the manumission papers serves as an important educational moment for the longtime teacher. Jebediah corrects her spelling of the key verb—"Ain't but one 't' in manumit...cept when you usin the pas tense," he says (*Known World*, 260). More literate in the language of freedom, Jebediah rejects the paper and hands it back to Fern to rewrite. Jebediah likewise rejects Fern's offer of a job. He tells her that he no longer wants any part of Virginia, which he has come to see as a "demon state." (*Known World*, 260). The issue of Jebediah's initial legal status is never resolved by the narrative. His superior literacy, which he demonstrates by the spelling lesson he gives Fern and his forging of two passes—one each in the names of Fern and Ramsey Elston—suggests that he also may have forged his freedom papers. Alternately, an unscrupulous former master who knew of Jebediah's literacy might have used that knowledge to profit from the illegal re-enslavement of a free man. Even if Jebediah did forge the first deed of manumission, however, Jones's decision to leave the issue ambiguous allows Jebediah's boisterous declaration of

freedom to protest not only his personal re-enslavement but the illegitimacy of the entire institution and the laws that sanction it. In Jebediah's case, the law, as executed by Skiffington, takes the minister's word over Jebediah's and protects the property interests of the slave owner.

When Sherriff Skiffington learns of Augustus Townsend's re-enslavement and sale, he tells Mildred that "the law cares," but Counsel Skiffington's failure to act or even communicate Mildred's report of her missing husband speaks louder than the sheriff's empty assurances. While acting as a patroller and, thus, as an agent of the sheriff, Harvey Travis destroys the documentary evidence of Augustus's freedom by devouring Townsend's free papers. He then not only allows the sale of a free man, he reaps the profits of the illegal sale. The failure of Skiffington's deputy to report Mildred's initial complaint also contributes to the miscarriage of justice, which is only a prelude to Counsel's commission of murder. Once he learns of August Townsend's disappearance, Sherriff Skiffington writes an official report but grows less certain that a criminal act has been committed. He questions whether the state of Virginia even considers the enslavement of a free black man a crime. In considering the witness's statements, Skiffington knows Harvey Travis to be unscrupulous in business, especially after the sheriff was forced to mediate a dispute between Travis and another patroller over the sale of a cow. Barnum Kinsey, the patroller who finally complains to Skiffington, is known to struggle with alcoholism, while Oden Peoples corroborates Harvey Travis's version of events. Skiffington considers that the law only affords Oden, a Cherokee, half the credibility of a white witness, but it is a half that Barnum Kinsey does not have. Here, as with the jury verdict against Brussard, Jones highlights an unequal application of the law in which ethnicity becomes the measure of a witness's reliability and a quarrel over ownership of livestock receives more attention from the sheriff than the disappearance of a free black citizen.

When the slave trader Darcy is finally caught in possession of kidnapped freedpeople and stolen slaves, he is convicted and sent to the same prison where Broussard died. One suspects Darcy's

conviction hinges less on the abduction and enslavement of freed people than on his theft of human property. Rather than trying Darcy's slave assistant, authorities sell the man at auction and use the money from his sale to compensate the owners of the slaves Darcy kidnapped. The families of the free kidnap victims receive no compensation, only a letter from the state admitting the obvious fact that the government failed to protect their loved ones. Apparently, no effort is made to rescue the missing free people, like Augustus Townsend. Augustus tells the poor Georgia farmer who buys him, "you can't raise your family on my back" and begins to walk north and out of slavery, when he is shot to death by the farmer (*Known World*, 345).

The government's inconsistent response to the kidnappings also indicates the novel's concern with indebtedness. After writing his manumission papers, Fern Elston supplies Jebediah Dickinson a wagon, a horse, and fifty dollars. Jebediah responds by asserting the balance of Ramsey's original debt: "You and your no-good husband owe me \$450 more and there ain't no way around it" (*Known World*, 260). In another scenario reminiscent of Faulkner's slavery-as-disease metaphor in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Counsel Skiffington's immediate family and bondspeople die of smallpox, which is carried to their plantation by one of Counsel's creditors. When Counsel sets his house ablaze with the disease-stricken bodies inside, he is presumed to be among the dead until he turns up in Manchester County, where his cousin hires him as a deputy. Both the creditor and the prostitute from whom he contracts the virus—the woman is also a former maid of the family in Calvin's photograph—transmit the disease without ever suffering any severe symptoms. In this scenario, Counsel's willingness to placate the man who holds his debts ultimately exposes his household to a disease that, in this case, proves fatal for slaves and Skiffingtons alike.

While Augustus Townsend's disappearance prompts minimal concern from the legal authorities, Sheriff Skiffington and his deputy cousin pursue the runaway Moses to the Townsend property, where Mildred gives him asylum. Years earlier, Augustus chose to settle in a remote part of the county to

distance himself from slaveholders, yet here, the Skiffingtons attempt to capture Moses and return him to slavery. During their exchange, the sheriff's rifle accidentally discharges, and the bullet strikes Mildred in the heart. While Counsel searches the house for Moses, his discovery of five twenty-dollar gold pieces fuels his greed for the non-existent fortune that he believes is hidden on the property. Convinced the sheriff will deny him the riches to regain his former social position, Counsel murders his cousin and conceals the crime by claiming that Mildred and John shot each other before he could intervene. When Counsel finds no additional money, only secret compartments he does not realize are meant to conceal runaway slaves, he burns the house down and tries to appropriate the land through a legal argument contrived by Arthur Brundle, the lawyer-merchant who served on the Broussard jury. Counsel is unsuccessful, mainly because Caldonia, the heir to the Townsend property, marries Louis Cartwright, and William Robbins exerts his influence to protect the property interests of his son's wife. Years earlier when he caught Henry tussling with Moses, Robbins lectured Henry on the willingness of the law to protect Henry's interests as a master and on the importance of conducting himself accordingly. Despite Skiffington's claims, the reality of slaveholding Manchester County is that application of the law rarely equates with justice. It frequently applies according to the whim of William Robbins and serves the interests of the slaveholding class. County sheriffs serve at the pleasure of Robbins, whose favor mainly depends on the officer's ability to prevent slave escapes. Robbins alone has the power to endow Henry with a position of mastery. Meanwhile, the lawyer-juror Brundle allows Broussard's conviction to stand on the basis of his French accent, and the novel's most egregious criminal acts are committed by law enforcement officials—Harvey Travis as patroller and Counsel Skiffington as deputy.

## **Murals**

In the final chapter of *The Known World*, the letter Calvin writes to his sister reports that he has found lodging and employment at a Washington hotel where he encounters two remarkable murals, the afore mentioned “map of life,” in Manchester County and a detailed rendering of Caldonia’s property. The hotel, Calvin writes, is owned cooperatively by the people who work there. Many of them are runaway ex-slaves, including Moses’s former wife Priscilla—who is now a confident free woman—and the artist who signs her work “Alice Night” in apparent homage to her former nocturnal explorations. Unlike the crude and outdated woodcut map that Jones associates with the antebellum legal system, Calvin suggests a divine quality to Alice’s artworks when he describes them as “what God sees when he looks down” (*Known World*, 384). The second mural depicting Caldonia’s property shows Caldonia standing before her house and all of the Townsend slaves except Alice, Priscilla, and her son Jaime, standing before their cabins. In her depiction, the departed have risen from their graves and stand before their cabins, enacting the resurrection from the social death that was also the subject of Alice’s most important chant. Henry, their former master, still occupies his grave. Calvin’s letter, dated April 12, 1861, is notably written on the day of the firing on Ft. Sumter. Jones refers to “The War between the States” six times in the novel but only as a time-fixing reference. In this final chapter, with Calvin’s letter, he equates Alice’s art and the resurrection of the Townsend slaves with the first shots of the Civil War.

## Chapter 13

### “I Never Promised I Would Write the Truth”: Geraldine Brooks’s *March* and the Formation of Cultural Memory in Two Family Stories

In the Pulitzer Prize-winning *March*, published in 2005, Geraldine Brooks narrates the previously untold Civil War experience of the title character, better known as the absent father of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. In the final scene of Brooks’s novel, after the March daughters press their father to say how each has changed during his absence, March is relieved when the conversation turns to other topics “before anyone [thinks] to ask their father how a year at war had changed *him*.”<sup>1</sup> That question, left unspoken and unexplored in *Little Women*, is the focus of Brooks’s *March*. Alcott’s story, Brooks explains in her afterward, is concerned with “the way a year lived at the edge of war has worked changes in the characters of the little women, but what war had done to March himself is left unstated. It is in this void that I have let my imagination work.”<sup>2</sup> The story she imagines is in some ways a familiar narrative, about the loss of idealism through the experience of war.<sup>3</sup> In March’s case, the unspoken shame and guilt that color the final scene are not the result of March having taken lives but of having failed to save them. He is tormented by his inefficacy, by the moral compromises he makes, and perhaps most of all, by the consequences of abiding by his pacifist convictions. March’s war experience, including teaching at a contraband farm and being attacked by Confederate guerrillas, focuses on aspects of the war that have been largely overlooked in novels of the Civil War and slavery.

From *Little Women*, slavery, like Mr. March, is almost totally absent; in Brooks’s novel, opposition to slavery not only underlies the minister’s idealism, it brings about the most significant

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<sup>1</sup> Geraldine Brooks, *March* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 273. Hereafter, this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *March*.

<sup>2</sup> Geraldine Brooks, afterward to *March*, 275.

<sup>3</sup> “Geraldine Brooks on Her Pulitzer Prize Winning Novel,” interview by Tony Jones, *ABC Transcripts* (Australia) April 19, 2006, LexisNexis Academic.

trials of a marriage that stands for the larger national Union. *March* reimagines one of literature's most iconic families as ardent abolitionists who offer their home as a refuge to runaway slaves but who are also implicated in the very bondage they oppose. Twenty years earlier, as a traveling salesman, March was partially responsible for the flogging of a slave, Grace Clement, whom he meets again during the Civil War. In all their years of marriage, March never reveals to his wife the part of his past that involves Grace. In wartime letters written to his spouse, March misrepresents his previous acquaintance with Grace and conceals his attraction to her. He portrays his transfer to the contraband department as the pursuit of a noble calling rather than the result of his failure as a chaplain and a compromising intimacy with Grace. Brooks's attention to narrative silences as well as the act of writing illustrates how the nation, represented by the Marches and the Clements, authored a sanitized myth of the war. Constructing her narrative in the space of what Alcott left untold, Brooks presents slavery—quite literally—as unspeakable familial violence. Southern slaveholders perpetrate that violence, but even the New England abolitionist March bears a moral and economic complicity. In her recasting of the iconic March family, Brooks imagines that the cause of abolition forged the parents' union and that day-to-day life in their household included the presence of runaway slaves. With the Clements, Brooks explores themes of mystified paternity, incest, and fratricide from the perspective of former slave Grace, whose story of abuse and familial decline can be characterized as a retelling of Faulkner's Sutpen saga. On one hand, *March* functions as an act of literary revision by addressing dual absences in *Little Women*—Mr. March and slavery; on the other, *March* demonstrates the very process of mythmaking by which slavery was written out of the national war narrative.

## Foreign Correspondent

Geraldine Brooks first read *Little Women* around age ten. Her mother recommended the novel



with a warning that no one was as “good-goody” as Marmee or the March children.<sup>4</sup> Rereading *Little Women* as an adult, knowing of the “rich and radical mind of Louisa May Alcott,” Brooks said she longed for the novel Alcott “might have written without the fetters of convention.”<sup>5</sup> Like the author of *Little Women*, who famously modeled her characters after her own family, Brooks looked to the real-life Alcotts to develop her characters. Sixty-one journal volumes recorded by Bronson Alcott, whose philosophies inspire those of the fictional March, provided important sources for Brooks, who said she “tried to be quite loyal to his [Bronson’s] voice if not always to his biography.”<sup>6</sup>

Like Brooks’s March, who in his youth peddled novelties to Southern plantation owners, young Bronson Alcott journeyed South as a traveling salesman. Unlike March, who parlays his profits into a substantial fortune with a sliver speculation and manufacturing investment, Bronson Alcott ended his peddling ventures in debt, where he would remain for much of his adult life. His disdain for money-making and his inability to keep a job left him financially dependent on friends, his wife, and eventually his famous daughter. Though Alcott held multiple teaching positions, his unorthodox curriculum invariably led to the closure of his schools. At his Boston Temple School, Alcott practiced innovative conversational teaching methods until parents learned he had introduced controversial religious doctrines and questioned his elementary-aged students about the metaphysical aspects of conception and childbirth. Most of his remaining students were withdrawn after Alcott admitted an African American student named Susan Robinson.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Murray Waldren, “The Time Traveller—Geraldine Brooks on the Wonders of Fiction,” *The Australian*, March 19, 2005, FACTIVA; Shaunagh O’Connor, “Making up March,” *Herald Sun* (Melbourne, Australia), April 16, 2005, FACTIVA; Teresa K. Weaver, “BOOK BUZZ: Read Between the Lines of ‘Little Women,’” *The Atlanta Journal–Constitution*, March 25, 2005, FACTIVA.

<sup>5</sup> “A Life in Books: Geraldine Brooks,” *Newsweek.com*, January 21, 2007, <http://www.newsweek.com/life-books-geraldine-brooks-98423>.

<sup>6</sup> Bron Sibree, “Civil War Revisited,” review of *March*, by Geraldine Brooks, *The Courier Mail* (Queensland, Australia), March 26, 2005, FACTIVA.

<sup>7</sup> Madelon Bedell, *The Alcotts: Biography of a Family* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1980), 15-16, 90, 131, 149.

In the Alcott family, it was Louisa who left home during the Civil War to join the ranks of Union nurses, an experience she later recorded in *Hospital Sketches*. Her service lasted six weeks, until she contracted typhoid fever and was taken home by her father.<sup>8</sup> Later that year, she contemplated teaching at the Port Royal contraband settlement.<sup>9</sup> In Brooks's novel, March adopts Bronson Alcott's pedagogical style with the ex-slaves he is sent to teach on a contraband farm, where he contracts a near-fatal fever. In *March*, this early free labor enterprise demonstrates ex-slaves' wartime vulnerability to Union soldier's racism, exploitation by their employer, and re-enslavement by Confederate guerrillas.

Like the fictional March sisters, Geraldine Brooks also grew up in Concord. Hers was the "inner west" neighborhood of Sydney, Australia. A graduate of Columbia Journalism School, she began her professional writing career as a reporter.<sup>10</sup> In explaining the origins of *March*, Brooks said she drew on her experience as a war correspondent and related the ethical dilemmas she explores in the novel to her coverage of the 1991 Kurdish uprising, following the First Gulf War. Her articles from that period detail the "hidden horrors of Saddam Hussein's regime," which came to light during that short-lived Kurdish rebellion.<sup>11</sup> Brooks also documented the suppression of that uprising through what many Kurds considered a betrayal by the United States. Her reports are filled with stories of suffering, including the death of the rebellion's youngest casualty, an infant delivered by Caesarian after the baby's mother lost both legs in an air raid.<sup>12</sup> For Brooks, the prisons made the strongest impression. In

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<sup>8</sup> Elaine Showalter, introduction to *Alternative Alcott*, by Louisa May Alcott, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), xix; Louisa May Alcott, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 116-117.

<sup>9</sup> Showalter, introduction to *Alternative Alcott*, xxix; Alcott et al., *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 120.

<sup>10</sup> Geraldine Brooks, *Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under to All Over*, 1st Anchor Books ed. (1998; repr., New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Geraldine Brooks, "Iraqi Kurds Awake from Long Nightmare," *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 1991, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Wall Street Journal.

a Dahuk jail, liberators discovered a trap door leading to underground cells and what journalist Brooks described as a “scene from hell”—a dozen prisoners crowded in the darkness, naked, starved, and filthy.<sup>13</sup> In Irbil, Brooks accompanied a former prisoner, Bashdar Majid, as he revisited the liberated security building where he was one of a hundred people crammed into a single 20'x12' cell. Bashdar was once taken to the “hanging room”—equipped with a giant hook suspended from the ceiling—and told he would be executed; he survived cable blows, electric shocks, and a beating that fractured his skull.<sup>14</sup> Another prison in Sulaimaniya included a designated “raping room” where female prisoners were sexually assaulted while male relatives were forced to watch.<sup>15</sup> The evidence of torture Brooks witnessed in these prisons raised troubling philosophical questions that she eventually translated into moral dilemmas of *March*. As she later explained, “I started to have an agony about: what’s the alternative? If you say you’re against war, does that mean in some way you’re saying torture is OK? And are you mad to ever think that the injustice of war can ever right other injustices?”<sup>16</sup>

In early April 1991, less than a month after the rebellion began, Brooks reported its disastrous end. “Sunday Morning as helicopter gunships rained rocket fire on the city of Irbil,” she wrote, “I was one of the tens of thousands trying to flee aerial bombardment and certain reprisals from the Iraqi government for the failed Kurdish uprising.”<sup>17</sup> The rebellion began days after the Gulf War cease-fire by rebels who believed they could count on support from the United States. President George H.W.

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<sup>12</sup> Geraldine Brooks, “As Rebellion Fails, Kurds, Once Again, Flee Cities in Sorrow,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 1991, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Wall Street Journal.

<sup>13</sup> Brooks, “Iraqi Kurds Awake from Long Nightmare.”

<sup>14</sup> Geraldine Brooks, “Kurdish Rebels Open Doors to Expose Horrors of Iraq,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 1991, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Wall Street Journal.

<sup>15</sup> Geraldine Brooks and Robert Greenberger, “History’s Victims: Now Dying in Iraq, Kurds Have Suffered At the Hands of Many,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 1991, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Wall Street Journal.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Keenan, “March to the Front,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 9, 2005, FACTIVA.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, “As Rebellion Fails, Kurds, Once Again, Flee Cities in Sorrow.”

Bush made public statements encouraging the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to overthrow their dictator, but the president apparently wanted Hussein deposed by the military. His overthrow by the Kurds, whom some feared might seek an independent state, risked geographic and, therefore, broader regional instability; it also had the potential to involve the United States in an Iraqi civil war. Bush insisted he had never committed to supporting the Kurdish uprising and, though he condemned the Kurdish deaths, declared his determination not to “get sucked into this by sending precious American lives into this battle.”<sup>18</sup> The tide of the rebellion turned when helicopter gunships were used without restraint against the Kurds once General Schwarzkopf clarified the ambiguous U.S. policy toward Iraqi aircraft: U.S. forces would not shoot down the helicopters.<sup>19</sup>

Fourteen years later, Brooks vividly recalled the massacre that followed: “There were bodies everywhere, and the first president Bush just went fishing. I lost a colleague, a photographer I’d traveled with, and a beautiful young Kurd who’d been helping us. Those of us with Western passports could get down off the mountains into Turkey. The Kurds couldn’t. They were trapped. We knew people were going to die in those mountains.”<sup>20</sup> Brooks’s introspection about the sins of war versus the immorality of inaction are most apparent when *March* depicts an unrestrained guerrilla war against civilians, when ex-slaves are deprived of a tentative and vaguely defined freedom, and when March’s pacifist convictions are tested by the question: to kill, or not to kill? *March* neither resolves nor aims to resolve these moral conflicts, but their introduction complicates a tradition of anti-war literature from *Jubilee* to *The Killer Angels* to *Cold Mountain* by suggesting that the consequences of inaction can be as devastating as the slaughter of battle. Then again, one of the first battlefields Brooks ever saw during the Iran-Iraq War was covered with bodies of Iranian youths who had been killed conducting “human-

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<sup>18</sup> Brooks and Greenberger, “History’s Victims.”

<sup>19</sup> Brooks, “As Rebellion Fails, Kurds, Once Again, Flee Cities in Sorrow.”

<sup>20</sup> Jane Sullivan, “A Life Beyond Bland Street,” *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia), April 30, 2005, FACTIVA.

wave attacks,” a scene she compared to Pickett’s charge at Gettysburg.<sup>21</sup>

As she hints in her acknowledgements to *March*, Brooks’s life became unusually associated with the world of battle reenactment while her husband, Tony Horowitz, researched his study of Civil War memory, *Confederates in the Attic*. “I was forever being dragged around Civil War sites,” Brooks recalls, “And I was very ungracious about it too—it was either Gettysburg on the Fourth of July, which is as hot as Hades, or some desolate field in mid-winter with the winds howling through corn stubble.”<sup>22</sup> Given these dreaded excursions, the volumes of Civil War material contending for shelf space in their house, and the reenactors camped in their backyard, Brooks began to tease her husband for “being a civil war bore.”<sup>23</sup> She retracts this statement in her acknowledgments to *March* and apologizes for “all the times I refused to get out of the car at Antietam or whined about the heat at Gettysburg.”<sup>24</sup> Amid her reluctant immersion into Civil War memory, Brooks realized that *Little Women*, which she had liked as a child, was one of the first novels to represent the conflict, and she began to wonder if Alcott had any particular battle in mind when she wrote of Mr. March being away near the fighting.

Brooks’s home in Waterford, Virginia, near Ball’s Bluff, the battle that has just been fought in the opening pages of *March*, also fueled her imagination. The belt buckle of a Union soldier uncovered in her court yard prompted her to think of the soldier who had worn it and what ideals might have driven him to fight. The house and the surrounding village were built by Quakers who, like March, were “pacifists and ardent abolitionists.” During the Civil War, Brooks explains, these Quaker villagers faced “an agonising test of conscience... and some decided that slavery was a worse evil than war... and

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<sup>21</sup> Keenan, “March to the Front.”

<sup>22</sup> Waldren, “The Time Traveller.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Brooks, afterword to *March*, 280.

they became among the few Virginians to fight on the Union side.<sup>25</sup> Around this time, as the United States mobilized for a second war with Iraq, Brooks says she felt “extremely conflicted.” She had witnessed and reported the violence committed under Saddam Hussein and felt that his remaining in power after the Persian Gulf War was “one of history’s great betrayals,” but she also reasoned, “you can’t use immoral means to solve a moral problem.”<sup>26</sup>

*March* is Brooks’s fourth book. Her previous works include the novel *Year of Wonders*; *Nine Parts of Desire*, a nonfiction work about the lives of Islamic women; and her memoir, *Foreign Correspondence*. In the latter, Brooks recounts how the letters she exchanged with pen pals became her earliest connections to the world beyond her Sydney neighborhood.<sup>27</sup> In the second part of the book, she tracks down her pen friends to discover what happened to them after their correspondence ended. The book’s most surprising revelations, which Brooks discloses only in the final pages, have to do with her father, whose own prolific correspondence inspired her to pursue her pen friendships. Lawrie Brooks, whom his daughter credits for her desire to become a journalist, was a professional singer until the age of fifty-four, when he quit show business and became a newspaper proofreader.<sup>28</sup> Born Bob Cutter, he was married with a young daughter when he had an affair with the wife of a Hollywood director. Both marriages ended in divorce, and when the scandal damaged his career, Cutter changed his name. “My father’s past remained a mystery to me,” Brooks writes, “revealed gradually, and only in accidental fragments.”<sup>29</sup> Her parents kept the story from young Geraldine to shield her from the

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<sup>25</sup> Waldren, “The Time Traveller.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Geraldine Brooks, *Foreign Correspondence*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 15.

judgments of their Catholic neighbors, who “equated divorce with damnation.”<sup>30</sup> Brooks did not realize until she was much older that many of the letters her father had vaguely attributed to American relatives were from the half-sister she finally met as an adult.<sup>31</sup> Traces of Geraldine Brooks’s own family story are evident in *March*, as family correspondence functions as an important, if unreliable, component of the narrative. Marmee’s discovery of her husband’s secret past and his attraction to Grace brings about a crisis in the March marriage that parallels the crisis of the national Union.

### A Secret Past

Brooks’s novel begins with one of the daily letters March promises to write to his wife and daughters. Of one such letter that arrives in the first chapter of *Little Women*, Alcott writes, “Very few letters were written in those hard times that were not touching, especially those which fathers sent home. In this one little was said of the hardships endured, the dangers faced, or the homesickness conquered; it was a cheerful, hopeful letter, full of lively descriptions of camp life, marches, and military news; and only at the end did the writer’s heart overflow with fatherly love and longing for the little girls at home.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the epistle Brooks’s March pens to his family conforms to Alcott’s description, but the letter that opens Brooks’s novel, like those March composes thereafter, is a strange amalgamation of diversion, falsehood, and omission that more resembles a work of fiction than an accurate account of life as an army chaplain. Grateful that his wife has no knowledge of the things he has witnessed, March rationalizes, “I promised her that I would write something every day... I never promised I would write the truth” (*March*, 4). That morning, during the battle of Ball’s Bluff, he had

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 204-206.

<sup>32</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, ed. Elaine Showalter (1868-69; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 8. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *Little Women*.

tried to help a soldier with a twisted knee cross the river to safety.<sup>33</sup> The soldier, Silas Stone, couldn't swim. He was shot midstream, and, in his panic, he thrashed and clawed and dragged his rescuer underwater. During their struggle, Stone jabbed March in the eye, pulled out patches of hair, and tore flesh from his throat. March held only a slight grip on the fabric of Stone's coat. When it ripped, March swam to recover his charge, who seemed nearly within his grasp until an unexpected wave and a swift current carried Stone out of reach and eventually towed him under.

The events of that morning are among the many secrets past and present March keeps from his spouse. Others include his visit more than twenty years earlier to the plantation house that now serves as an army field hospital and his attraction to the woman he met there. March came to the house as a traveling salesman and was invited to enjoy its owner's hospitality. While in residence, he conducted secret and illegal reading lessons with the daughter of the plantation cook. He did so at the request of Grace, a literate slave, who recognized little Prudence's longing to learn but who lacked March's freedom to carry books from the planter's library. The lessons went on at night and against the wishes of Prudence's mother Annie, who feared her daughter's learning to read would subject the child to a violent punishment. Instead, when Clement's manager discovered the incriminating papers covered with Prudence's handwriting, Grace confessed to initiating the child's education. Grace alone bore the blame and suffered the whipping that Clement required both Prudence and her tutor to watch. Not until he encounters Grace tending the Federal wounded does March tell his wife anything about her or the terrible consequences of that summer. Even then, March's letter reveals nothing of his previous acquaintance with Grace or his culpability in her punishment. His account calls to mind Southern postwar narratives that extol the loyalty of ex-bondspeople who remained with their former masters instead of pursuing their own freedom. March writes home about a slave he considers an exemplar of

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<sup>33</sup> This episode also may have been inspired by a near-death incident during one of Bronson Alcott's peddling trips. According to biographer Madelon Bedell, Bronson Alcott "nearly drowned when a fellow peddler, drowning himself, grabbed him in a strangle hold." Bedell, *The Alcotts*, 14.



“Negro fitness for emancipation.” She nurses the soldiers so adeptly that the colonel offers her a paid position in Washington. Where this woman reveals the “cloth of gold from which her character is spun,” writes March, is that she refuses to abandon her ailing master, whom she insists is unable to survive without her. “And yet I know,” adds March, who praises her as a model of Christian forgiveness but omits his involvement, “that this very man once had her whipped from some most trivial transgression of his authority” (*March*, 41).

By March’s recollection, his experience with the Clements awakened his opposition to slavery; his subsequent observance of a slave auction called him to the pulpit to denounce it. After leaving the Clement estate, young March visited a church on the outskirts of Petersburg that held its Bible study at the same time a slave sale was conducted outside in the courtyard. The auctioneer’s shouts were audible inside the church, but the congregants took no notice that two children “kidnapped” away from their mother were sold. Finally, when the pastor solicited subscriptions to finance missionary work in Africa, March challenged the hypocrisy by suggesting the Gospel might be propagated more cheaply to the enslaved people “on the auction block next door.” The churchgoers responded with “hisses and tuttings” and asked March to leave. In the courtyard, March witnessed the sale of a free black man for “nonpayment of his city taxes” and reflected on “How intolerable [it was] to have once earned freedom and then have it snatched away” (*March*, 43). Finally, March witnessed the sale of a slave youth whose age he estimated to be about fourteen. As the buyer took custody of the youth, March observed a woman in the slave pen “reaching out her arms in the boy’s direction, crying out farewells to the son she would likely never see again” (*March*, 44). Wondering what might have happened if the pastor had led his congregation outside to protest the auction, March decides that “the pulpit was the place from which to decry this barbarous system” (*March*, 44).

While Brooks invents a secret past for March, she also imagines that opposition to slavery is both the basis for the March marriage and a significant aspect of the daughters’ childhoods. Four years

after his fateful visit to the Clement estate, March's turn as a visiting pastor in Concord occasions his first meeting with his future spouse, Margaret Day, nicknamed Marmee. With the true purpose of pursuing a courtship, March returns to Concord under the pretext of investing in Henry Thoreau's new process for manufacturing pencils. Marmee arrives late to a dinner party given by Mrs. Thoreau and leaves early to attend to a fugitive from slavery sheltered in her family's home. During her brief appearance at the party, Margaret Day has an impassioned exchange with Ralph Emerson, who expresses his concern that if her illegal activities with the Underground Railroad are discovered, her frail father, not Margaret, will suffer the consequences. In turn, Margaret accuses Emerson of doing too little as a public figure for the cause of abolition. Emerson says he speaks on behalf of any black person he sees mistreated but claims it is not in his power to do more. Margaret reminds him that he draws huge crowds at the Lyceum and writes for at least a dozen journals. "To say that you can do no more is a sham!" insists Margaret, "It is a disgrace! Worse, it is a lie!" March finds this first glimpse of Marmee's temper "immensely shocking" (*March*, 84).

Agitated and unable to sleep, March takes a walk in the woods where he again meets Marmee. As their conversation turns to the man she assisted earlier in the evening, Marmee begins to weep as she recalls how the man had been branded on his cheek. "A human being," she cries, "and they shoved a red hot-iron into the flesh of his face" (*March*, 87). Though their actual wedding ceremony occurs two weeks later, March recalls euphemistically, "we married each other that night." His account suggests a strong connection between Marmee's pathos for the enslaved and the pair's sexual coupling, particularly as Marmee's report of the "red-hot iron" is echoed in March's account that "that same furnace in her nature that had flared up in anger blazed again, in passion" (*March*, 88).

The catalyst for their marriage, March and Marmee's shared opposition to slavery remains a significant aspect of their family life. In Brooks's novel, the March daughters grow up in a house that serves as a station on the Underground Railroad route running from Boston Harbor to Canada. "My

girls had grown accustomed to welcoming a strange black face at our table,” recalls March. “From earliest childhood, they were schooled in the need for tact within the home and circumspection outside of it” (*March*, 172). The family is careful not to ask personal information of the runaways, both for their protection and for the safety of the people they assist. When March overhears little Amy bragging to a friend about the “hidey-hole” upstairs, he discourages any further betrayal of the family secret by reading aloud from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. March also reprises the earlier imagery of hot iron and blazing furnace to explain the effect of motherhood on Marmee’s opposition to slavery. “If Marmee had been ardent in her abolitionism before the birth of her children, their coming into our lives set her on fire” (*March*, 117). He recalls finding his spouse nursing the infant Beth, while Jo slept huddled against her and Meg played at her feet. “It was a delightful scene of maternal tranquility,” says March, “except that my wife’s shoulders shook and her face was wet with tears.” “I am thinking of the slave mother,” Marmee explains. “How can I sit here, enjoying the comfort of my babes, when somewhere in this wicked land *her* child is being torn from her arms?” (*March*, 117). In fact, Brooks’s novel is filled with stories of mothers and children separated by slavery—the children auctioned in Petersburg, the sale of Grace’s mother before her first birthday, the murder of little Jimes by Confederate guerrillas who plan to re-enslave the contraband workers, and the sale of March’s former student Prudence. While Marmee’s sympathy for the slave mother highlights the trope of mother-child separation, March’s recollections also suggest that abolitionist principles and activism played a central role in the parents’ marriage and in the Marches’ family life.

### **Incriminating Fortunes**

While the Marches devote themselves to abolitionist work, the few details Brooks provides about his business investments implicate Mr. March in the slave economy. After spending two years in

the slave South, March wagers some of the proceeds in a silver speculation that affords him a controlling interest in six Connecticut factories. Though he eventually divests himself of the factory ownership on moral grounds, he expresses no remorse that the seeds of his fortune were acquired in the slave economy of the South by selling his goods to planters like Clement. Brooks may also suggest economic complicity in the tale of Flora, one of only two women sheltered by the Marches who make the journey to Canada alone. She arrives disguised in boy's clothes, her feet wrapped in dirty rags, her back marked by the whipping she received as punishment for her first, failed runaway attempt. Flora, about the same age as Meg, is also pregnant; her reticence, particularly toward March, suggests she has been sexually abused. Only shy Beth manages to gain Flora's trust and learns that she had been forced to work since childhood in a Richmond factory. To Beth, who imagines that slaves at least have the comfort of fresh air, this confinement seems particularly cruel. Though Brooks does not specify what goods March's factories produce, the personal history of ex-slave Flora suggests similarities between her previous working conditions and those endured by the factory workers whose labor supplied March's income. Brook's attention to factory work may also hint at the economic connections between industrial New England and the slave South and the possibility that the slave economy not only provided the initial capital for March's investments but indirectly increased his wealth.

In *Little Women*, Alcott explains the March family's diminished circumstances as Mr. March having "lost his property trying to help an unfortunate friend"; in Brooks's novel, March spends the last of his fortune to pay John Brown's debts (*Little Women*, 36). After becoming aware of the exploitative conditions of the factory system, March began to divest himself of these holdings. He explains, "I had come to the conclusion that I could not, in conscience, profit from the degradation of human toil and the despoliation of water and air, once I began to grasp how very much the returns on my investments were married to these consequences" (*March*, 122). After liquidating these assets, March uses his fortune to sponsor the work of Radical Abolitionist John Brown. The affiliation with Brown ultimately

impoverishes the March family, who unwittingly may have helped finance the raid on Harper's Ferry. Though he opposes slavery, March has other motives for supporting Brown. According to March, his wife saw Brown as "a heroic figure," and, he admits, "I wanted her to see *me* that way." Knowing he could not match Brown for daring or "blood-dipped oratory," March reasoned, "If I could not earn my wife's esteem, perhaps at least I had the means with which to purchase it" (*March*, 122). Brown persuaded March to invest in a land speculation scheme; he planned to use the profits to finance mass slave escapes. March accommodated Brown's numerous requests for capital, not knowing that Brown had used the land as collateral to secure other loans. When the speculation failed and Brown had no way to satisfy the debts he owed on the worthless property, March explains, "I used the last of my wealth to pay off his [Brown's] creditors, rather than see him jailed for fraud and his work for abolition ended" (*March*, 125). After Brown's arrest at Harper's Ferry, March realizes to his dismay that instead of a slave exodus, his fortune probably helped finance an armed insurrection that violated his non-violent principles.

Confronted with a similar contradiction between abolition and non-violence, March leads the call for enlistment in Concord and signs on as an army chaplain. On the eve of the most devastating action of the novel, March recalls his speech of a year earlier, in which he inspired the youth of Concord to volunteer. He pledged to accompany them in their noble fight until "all the children of Israel have come into their inheritance," and the United States has become "one nation...forever free!" (*March*, 183). Instead of ministering to the Concord troops he persuaded to enlist, March is assigned to a regiment whose soldiers hail from mill towns; they do not share his fervor for abolition and do not welcome his attempts to promote the cause. "If war can ever be said to be just, then this war is so," March reasons. "It is action for a moral cause, with the most rigorous of intellectual underpinnings" (*March*, 65). Yet what he witnesses of the "injustice done in the waging of it" erodes March's belief in the righteousness of the Civil War. His inefficacy as a spiritual advisor and physical rescuer, as well as

his daily deceptions to spare his family, also make March doubt his purpose in the war (*March*, 65).

March admits that he hopes one day to go back to being “the man of moral certainty I was that [recruitment] day; that innocent man, who knew with such clear confidence exactly what it was that he was meant to do” (*March*, 184). Already transformed by his war experience, March faces his greatest moral crisis as a teacher of freed slaves terrorized by Confederate guerrillas.

## **Free Labor**

After the army surgeon witnesses a compromising moment with Grace, March’s reassignment to the contraband department sends him to one of earliest free labor operations involving former bondspeople. Officially, his duty at Oak Landing is to operate a school. Unofficially, he acts as intermediary between the workers and their employer. After sinking all his resources into a one-year lease of the plantation, Ethan Canning arrived to find the existing cotton crop diminished by bad weather and a delayed harvest. Now, with only a slim chance to recoup his investment, Canning exhausts his laborers and himself in a desperate attempt to avert financial ruin.

The living and working conditions he discovers at Oak Landing compel March to advocate on behalf of his pupils and to advise Canning on relations with his workers. Zeke’s confinement to a well, reportedly for slaughtering a hog to feed his children, and the lack of medical treatment for the critically ill initially suggest excessive discipline and neglect by Canning. The employer’s conversations with March reveal a more complex situation. The slaughtered hog, Canning explains, fed two of Zeke’s adult sons who had gone to war as servants to the overseer’s sons and who now ride with a band of irregulars, “the very men,” Canning notes “who harass and threaten [his] existence” (*March*, 109). The bondsmen returned to Oak Landing briefly, until Canning made clear that if they stayed, he expected them to work. According to Canning, Zeke’s sons prefer to be slaves to Confederate guerrillas

than work in the fields as contraband. The two versions of the story reveal that Zeke, like March in his letters, omits crucial details about how he ended up at the bottom of the well, where March finds and rescues him; but the complaints Zeke registers about Canning do contain elements of truth. The hunger Zeke describes, though not suffered by dependent children as he leads March to believe, is a very real consequence of Canning's demanding work routine. His sixteen-hour workdays not only exceed the seasonal nine- and ten-hour limits allowed by army regulations, they also leave workers no time to garden for their own sustenance. Time and again, March must clarify the legal parameters of their relationship both to Canning, who exceeds the authority of a free labor boss, and to his workers, who find little to distinguish their current employment from their former enslavement. March counsels Zeke that he is not Canning's property. "You are contraband of war. You are his employee, not his slave." "S that so?" replies Zeke, "Sure enough still feel like I's his slave" (*March*, 100). Likewise, when a drawdown of the nearby Union regiment threatens to leave Oak Landing unprotected from Confederate guerrillas, Canning plans to hire guards to keep his workers from fleeing. March must remind Canning that he is not their master and has no right to hold his employees against their will.

In his role as mediator, March applies to Marmee for supplies that ultimately improve the health and spirits of the workers. He also reminds Canning of army labor regulations and advises the employer to put on a cheerful face when he pays out the wages the workers suspect they will never see. After Canning makes good on his promise, the laborers respond with reciprocal good will; they turn over a store of cotton they salvaged and hid in their mattresses when Confederate guerrillas ordered them to burn the plantation's cotton bales. This unexpected proffering is enough to keep Canning from losing his investment.

As for the residents who are too sick to work, March learns it was not Canning who denied them medical care but the army surgeon who refused to treat them. The doctor told Canning he considered the laborers "only animals, and not half as valuable as cattle" (*March*, 107). Aside from the

guerrillas, the doctor's cruelty is rivaled only by the Federal scout who invites hungry black children to scrape his cooking pot but does not warn them that the iron kettle has been heating on the fire for hours. March is summoned by the anguished cries of the little boy Jimes, his palm covered in blistering hot molasses. Earlier objections to the chaplain's sermons suggests Union soldiers are merely uninterested in the cause of abolition, but the surgeon's refusal to treat the sick and the scout's willful injury of Jimes portray Federal soldiers as unabashed racists, who are either impervious to suffering or consider it a source of amusement (*March*, 139). Earlier in the novel, when March reports a Federal soldier for attempting to dispossess a Confederate woman of her valuables and for groping the woman's daughter, the commanding officer only instructs the private not to repeat the offense but recommends a transfer for March. While the novel portrays Union soldiers as undisciplined and depraved, it also implies that March's idealism has no place in the army. Even more significantly, *March* blurs any ideological distinctions between regular Federal soldiers and the Confederate guerrillas whose assault on Oak Landing, followed by the counter action to liberate the kidnapped labor force, are the primary military actions of the novel.

## **Rules of War**

When the reduction of Federal forces at Waterbank leaves Oak Landing vulnerable to guerrilla attack, Jesse, whom March identifies as his most promising student, approaches him privately to ask his plans and warn that if the irregulars do attack, they will surely kill March. March downplays the danger and refuses to arm himself for protection. He argues that his and Canning's status as noncombatants will prevent the guerrillas from doing them harm. "The Confederate soldier is a hard and desperate fighter," March declares, "but he is not a savage. There are rules, even in war" (*March*, 164). Soon after, as March conceals himself in a mound of cotton seed, Confederate raiders try to lure him from his



hiding place by threatening to behead the elderly Ptolemy; when March stays put, the raiders carry out the execution. Unable to locate the abolitionist teacher, the Confederates pilfer the house for valuables, set fire to the cotton fields, and kidnap several residents, mostly women and children they plan to sell back into slavery. The guerillas operate with the supposed cooperation of Zeke, who, March concludes, must have begrudged Canning's earlier harshness and remained loyal to his sons and the Confederate troops they serve.

The subsequent failed rescue attempt confuses what remains of March's moral conviction. Outnumbered ten to one, Jesse plans to pick off the guerrillas one by one after they succumb to the physic-laced alcohol he left to be taken in the raid. When Zeke's son indicates his intention to assault Zannah, Jesse stops March from intervening. He explains that if March makes their presence known while the troops are still sober, their thwarted rescue will surely leave Zannah to be sold where she would likely endure habitual abuse. After killing one of the guerrillas and appropriating his weapons, Zeke hands the man's pistol and saber to March, who returns the gun and insists, "I had come here hoping to free people, but I was a chaplain, not a killer" (*March*, 196). After the murder and re-enslavement of the people he came to liberate, March laments this abstention from violence. Despite his wife's arguments to the contrary, he reasons that his inaction contributed to the fate of the people he had meant to help. Marmee argues that a betrayal of his own principles would have been worse, but March continues to blame himself for his ineffectiveness against the guerrilla violence. As Jesse makes his presence known with a fatal gunshot to the guerrilla Cato, he sets off what March later recalls as a "blur of noise and bodies, shots and screaming" (*March*, 200). Attempting to place himself between a Confederate and the hostages he aims to shoot, March arrives an instant too late to block the bullet that strikes May. In his one assertion of physical force, March tussles with that shooter until Cilla, the little girl who reminds him of his daughter Amy, thrusts a saber through the guerrilla's neck. March picks up Cilla and runs for the cover of the trees but instead charges into the path of the Confederate major, who

shoots Canning point-blank in the face, then shoots March. March awakens sometime afterward to a tableau of bodies: the Confederates, Canning, May, and Cilla. The child who came to his aid and fought as March refused, lies on her side as though asleep, except that where a bayonet sliced her open, her organs have spilled onto the ground beside her (*March*, 201-201).

With carnage that belies March's assertion, "there are rules even in war," this action, together with E.L. Doctorow's *The March*, represents a shift in the representation of Civil War combat. The trilogies of Bruce Catton and Shelby Foote from the 1950s to the 1970s related the Civil War as a secession of battles that unfolded like a series of sporting contests between the regular forces of two opposing armies. With greater attention to the horror, bloodshed, and loss, Ken Burns reprised the formula in his 1990 documentary *The Civil War*, while Jeff Shaara carried it through his two Civil War novels of the mid to late 1990s. Beginning with Inman's confrontations with Federal raiders and the Confederate Home Guard in *Cold Mountain*, Civil War novels shift their emphasis away from the battlefield. With their concern for activities of Confederate guerrillas, *March* and *The March* follow a scholarly reevaluation that, according to historian Daniel Sutherland, shows "the guerrilla war, far from being a sideshow, was a crucial part of the larger war" and in some areas of the South, "was the war itself, a war with its own rules, its own chronology, its own policies, its own turning points, its own heroes, villains, and victims."<sup>34</sup> In *March*, the guerrilla war does not distinguish between soldiers and noncombatants. The killing is indiscriminate, and as Cilla demonstrates, even children may commit or suffer fatal violence.

Though the major's bullet only grazes him, a recurrence of his saddleback fever leaves March slipping in and out of consciousness. He learns from Zannah, who returns to care for him, that she is the only one of the captives who is not killed or re-enslaved. A nun on the medical ship that transports

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel E. Sutherland, "Sideshow No Longer: A Historiographical Review of the Guerrilla War," *Civil War History*, 46 (March 2000): 1.

March relates to the hospital staff how Zannah carried March to the Union lines for assistance. The federals initially mistake March for her Confederate master and refuse him medical attention until Zannah uses a charred stick to scrawl a note on the satin scarf March selected for her from Marmee's shipment of supplies. The note reads, "capn March/ yoonin preechr/ he cum from plase cal concrd/ he a gud kin man" (*March*, 205).

### **Words Made Indecipherable**

Geraldine Brooks constructs Part Two of *March* around Marmee's trip to Washington to nurse her ailing husband. In *Little Women*, her absence exacerbates the crisis of Beth's scarlet fever. In *March*, Marmee's discovery of her husband's secret past, his attraction to Grace, and the deceptions he penned in his letters, precipitate a crisis in the March marriage that Brooks associates with the Civil War and the crisis of national Union. Narrated mostly from Marmee's point of view, the Washington chapters, at times, contradict March's version of the family history. Brooks also conjures scenes from *Little Women* that serve as allegory for a national reconciliation process that largely excised slavery from the national narrative of the war. With particular focus on the act of writing, *March* demonstrates in microcosm the formation of cultural memory that ultimately excluded slaves' experience while obscuring the nation's enslaved past.

With the satin scarf on which Zannah writes her message to the Federal troops, Brooks also evokes the authorial experience of the absent seamstress and suggests the intertextuality of *March* and *Little Women*. When March's belongings are returned to her at the hospital, Marmee is at first "baffled" as to why anyone would bother to keep what appears to be nothing more than a "square of filthy cloth." Just as she is about to cast it into the stove, she recognizes the uneven hem as the signature needlework of her daughter Jo, the aspiring writer who cannot stitch straight because her mind invariably wanders

to the plot of her most recent story. On closer examination, Marmee discerns that what she had first mistaken for “random stains” are actually “smears of what once had been words, written, it seemed, with charcoal” but that are now indecipherable (*March*, 230). In that single square of cloth, Brooks weaves the authorial experience of three writers: Jo, whose stitches make legible her process of literary invention; Alcott, who created Jo in her own image; and Zannah, who most literalizes the suppressed narrative of slavery’s violence. Brooks also conjures what little Alcott’s novel has to say about the Civil War and slavery.

Early in her professional writing career, when Alcott earned as little as five dollars for her stories, the determination to support herself compelled her to pursue more reliable forms of income.<sup>35</sup> In the first published volume of Alcott’s letters and diaries, Edna Dow Cheney wrote of Alcott, “Sewing was her resource when nothing else offered, but it is almost pitiful to think of her as confined to such work when great powers were lying dormant in her mind.”<sup>36</sup> Alcott’s journal entries reveal the same habit of multitasking that Geraldine Brooks attributes to Jo. In March 1856, after selling a story for ten dollars and earning another four dollars for her needlework, Alcott mused, “Sewing won’t make my fortune; but I can plan my stories while I work, and then scribble ‘em down on sundays.”<sup>37</sup> Subsequent entries record the literary efforts of the more established writer, who continued to sew for her family and participate in patriotic sewing bees for Union soldiers. In one entry, Alcott records sewing on a summer wardrobe for her sister May, then having her plans to write delayed by a visit from John Brown’s daughters.<sup>38</sup>

By revealing Jo as the seamstress of the turquoise scarf, Brooks evokes that character’s

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<sup>35</sup> Louisa Alcott Letter to Bronson Alcott, November, 29, 1856, in Louisa May Alcott, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, eds. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeline B. Stern (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 26.

<sup>36</sup> Edna D. Cheney, ed., *Louisa May Alcott: Life, Letters and Journals* (1889; repr., New York: Gramercy Books, 1995), 47.

<sup>37</sup> Alcott et al., *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 78.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

authorial development not only in the first volume of *Little Women*, but also after Mr. March's return to Concord, where Brooks's novel ends. In the portion of *Little Women* that coincides with the timeline of *March*, Amy spitefully burns Jo's book of fairy tales, destroying the only copy of what has taken Jo years to write. "My dear, don't let the sun go down upon your anger," Marmee advises, but contrary to her mother's advice, Jo is slow to forgive. In her rancor, Jo fails to warn her sister of a skating hazard, leaving Amy to plunge through the ice of a thinly frozen river. Though the younger sister survives the mishap without even catching a cold, Jo repents her behavior and reproves herself for the failure to "cure" her "dreadful temper" (*Little Women*, 79). To the fifteen-year-old authoress, the loss of her entire oeuvre represents something comparable to the expropriation of an eldest child; subsequent chapters of *Little Women* equate Jo's relationship to her stories as that of a mother to her children, while her first full-length novel becomes her "first-born" (*Little Women*, 437, 270). Yet *Little Women* treats Jo's failure to forgive her sister as a greater offense than Amy's intentional destruction of what represents years of literary toil. *Little Women* pronounces all "forgiven and forgotten," as the siblings resolve their feud with a hug and kiss, but only after Jo learns to appreciate "the sweetness of self-denial and self-control" (*Little Women*, 83). Through the lens of *March*, this chapter of *Little Women* embodies the national politics of post-Civil War era. Writing in 1868, Alcott could not have known the failure of Reconstruction; but from a vantage point of the twenty-first century, Amy's incendiary crime, the near destruction of the family, and the manner of the conflict's resolution, serve as an allegory for the politics of national reconciliation.

In *March*, the cloth that bears evidence of Jo's literary imagination also provides the canvas for Zannah's note, which narrowly escapes the fate of Jo's manuscripts and, with words that become illegible, suggests the erasure of slave testimony. By having Zannah, who has lost her son, compose the note on a scarf sewn by Jo, Brooks relates the erasure and near-destruction of slave testimony to the metaphorical civil war of *Little Women* and to a reconciliation that lacks justice for the loss of a "first-

born.”

The defacement of Zannah’s authorship through the circulation of her text is especially significant for a character who otherwise personifies the legal injustice of slavery and the suppression of slave testimony. After the Federal scout allows Jimes to burn his hand, Zannah communicates her gratitude for March’s kindness with gift of a palmetto hat but responds with silent stares when March urges her to join the class discussions. These lessons consist of March asking his students the meaning of words like *meek* and *brute* and examples of meek and brutish behavior. “By such meandering paths,” March explains, “I led them to reflect on their situation, and gave them a proper voice with which to speak of it” (*March*, 142). Zannah, though, is physically unable to join these discussions. Jesse finally relates her personal history of sexual assault and mutilation by two drunken white men. During the assault, Zannah screamed so loud in protest that as one of her attackers restrained her, the other compounded the violence by cutting out her tongue. The law, which recognized the assault as a transgression against her owners’ property, would have sought punishment on their behalf, not Zannah’s, but even when the owners complained to the legal authorities, the case was dismissed on grounds that Zannah was “unable to make a statement regarding the alleged assault” (*March*, 146). A verdict based on her status as property, which denied the physical and emotional injury to Zannah, could hardly qualify as justice, but precisely because the assault deprives Zannah of the ability to communicate her experience, the crime, which literalizes slaves’ voicelessness under the law, goes entirely unpunished. If she had been literate at the time of her assault, Zannah might have provided a written statement that allowed her owners to press charges, but as readers know from Grace’s whipping, literacy is illegal for a slave. Later, at the guerrilla encampment, as Zeke’s son singles out Zannah, Jesse’s refusal to interfere, even though his intention is to spare her a life of chronic abuse, allows the original trauma to be repeated in a second assault. When the Federals to whom Zannah delivers the ailing March mistake him for her Confederate master, Zannah reciprocates March’s

advocacy for his students; she exercises the literacy she acquires in March's school to insist that he receive medical care. Her education provides, however limited, a means of self-expression that slavery denied. But unlike Frederick Douglass and Phyllis Wheatley, the African American literary role-models March introduces in his curriculum, Zannah's authorship manifests neither as poetry nor autobiography. Zannah's own traumatic experiences are told only in the second- and third-hand narration of Jesse and March. The biography Zannah writes belongs to March. She uses her newly acquired literacy to tell in four lines the story of the life she saves and to testify to March's decency as "gud kin man" (*March*, 205). The subsequent erasure of Zannah's written testimony reflects a process of cultural memory formation that rendered slavery and slave experience illegible.

### **Marriage and Slavery in the March Family**

Marmee's last-second decision to save Zannah's scarf from the stove also evokes a second instance of literary destruction in *Little Women*. In Part Two of Alcott's novel, Friedrich Bhaer denounces sensation fiction as "bad trash" and makes Jo so ashamed of her own stories that she repeats Amy's earlier violence by committing every last page to the stove. After experimenting with moral tales and children's stories that do not sell, Jo abstains from writing until her mother's encouragement leads her to resume her pen. Jo seemingly finds her literary voice writing about her sisters, but she again sets aside her literary aspirations to marry Bhaer and convert Aunt March's Plumfield into a school for boys. In the closing pages of *Little Women*, Jo reflects that her youthful ambition to seek fame and fortune through her writing "seems selfish, lonely and cold to me now." While she has not abandoned hope that "I may write a good book yet," she defers that dream to fulfill more immediate responsibilities to her extended Plumfield family (*Little Women*, 489). This was not Alcott's original vision for her fictional counterpart, but her readers' fixation on marriage for the March sisters partially

determined the conclusion of *Little Women*. “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a women’s life,” Alcott recorded in her journal. To this, the author firmly declared, “I *won’t* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one.”<sup>39</sup> Though she held to this resolution, she also confided her frustration to Elizabeth Powell, an instructor of calisthenics at Vassar and future dean of Swarthmore College. Alcott informed Powell that a sequel, what readers know as part two of *Little Women*, would be available soon, but she also warned that “like all sequels [it] will probably disappoint or disgust most readers, for publishers wont [sic] let authors finish up as they like but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me.”<sup>40</sup> Alcott went on to explain the fate she preferred for Jo and the one on which she finally settled: “‘Jo’ should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, *or* somebody, that I didn’t dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her.” Alcott added, “I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect.”<sup>41</sup> While Alcott accommodated her reader’s requests for Jo to marry, she also provided a subtext that portrayed marriage as a form of oppression, a theme Geraldine Brooks renders more overt in *March*.

Though slavery as an institution is absent from *Little Women*, Alcott characterizes marriage as a forfeiture of liberty and most often invokes the term “slave” to refer to domestic and familial relationships. As Jo rejects Laurie’s proposal, she cites their incompatibility and, more importantly, her belief that she will never marry because “I love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>40</sup> Louisa Alcott, letter to Elizabeth Powell, Concord, 20 March [1869], in Alcott et al., *Selected Letters*, 124-125.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid; Madeleine B. Stern, note 11, introduction to Alcott et al., *Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 22; John Matteson, *Eden’s Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*, pbk. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 346. In an earlier letter to her Uncle Samuel May, Alcott hinted that she would have preferred to leave her characters as perpetual adolescents. She wrote that she disliked sequels in general and that “publishers are very pewise [sic] & wont let authors have their way so my little women must grow up & be married off in a very stupid style”; Louisa May Alcott letter to Samuel May, Boston, 6 Jan 1869 in Alcott et al., *Selected Letters*, 121-122.



any mortal man” (*March*, 365). As Jo contemplates an attachment to Bhaer, Alcott casts their potential betrothal as a battle defeat for her heroine, who is “mortally afraid of being laughed at for *surrendering*, after her many and vehement *declarations of independence* [emphasis mine] (*Little Women*, 468). Alcott also frequently associates the term slave with children and domestic responsibilities. Mr. Bhaer “makes a slave of himself” for his charges (*Little Women*, 340). Meg’s children have tantrums that made her “an abject slave to their caprices” (*Little Women*, 393). As John Brooke advises Meg how to deal with their son’s bedtime rebellion, he insists his spouse has “made a slave of herself long enough” (*Little Women*, 395). In the complex relationship between twin siblings, Demi “tyrannize[s] over Daisy,” but defends her against everyone else, while Daisy makes herself a “galley-slave” in her adoration of her brother (*Little Women*, 462, 461).<sup>42</sup>

In Brooks’s novel, March’s recollection of his early acquaintance with Marmee recounts her denunciation of the limitations placed on women’s education. According to Marmee, even those women permitted access to higher learning are forced to temper their aspirations. They may study art, music, or language, but the application of these skills is limited to “drawing room entertainment.” In their selection of literature, Marmee notes, women are expected to abstain from anything “passionate” or argumentative that might “corrupt our delicate minds.” In what can easily be read as a commentary on the fate of Alcott’s Jo, Brooks’s Marmee, decries this curriculum as intellectually “stultifying, oppressive, crippling” and vows that if she ever has daughters of her own, she will “not see their minds molded into society’s simpering ideal of womanhood” (*March*, 62-64). Though their union owes much to Marmee’s own passion, March apparently spends their married life attempting to stifle the very quality that initially attracted him to his wife. “I tried to teach her something about *her* new place,” he recalls, “giving her to understand, with gentle hints and loving guidance, that what might be considered

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<sup>42</sup> Alcott also invokes the term “slave” when she writes of the oppressive quality Jo ascribes to favors, when she describes Amy as a “loyal slave of the ring” she received from Aunt March and wears as reminder not to be selfish, and in the title of a play advertised in *The Pickwick Portfolio*; Alcott, *Little Women*, 297, 218, 104.

lapses of high spirits in a young maiden were in no way proper in one who was now a mother and a wife” (*March*, 115). Part of this instruction includes March raising his finger to his lips, the signal the spouses adopted to indicate Marmee’s need for vocal restraint when, according to March, Marmee asked him to “help her curb her temper” (*March*, 118).

Jo of *Little Women* observes many such gestures between her parents but only learns the meaning of the silent exchange after Amy’s ice skating mishap. Marmee consoles Jo by confiding what Geraldine Brooks takes as evidence that Marmee was “a real hellion.”<sup>43</sup> “You think your temper is the worst in the world; but mine used to be just like it...,” Marmee says, “I’ve been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it” (*Little Women*, 79). For that, she credits her husband, whose subtle, silencing gesture, Marmee reports, “saved me from many a sharp word” (*Little Women*, 81). In Brooks’s rewriting, March’s effort to silence his wife and stifle her passion is overtly represented as a form of oppression. As she recounts Aunt March’s offer to adopt one of the March daughters following the debt debacle with Brown, Brooks reveals new details of Marmee’s anger and discontent in the March marriage. Infuriated by the aunt’s offer and her reference to Meg as a financial “burden,” Marmee jumps to her feet and approaches the woman, “most menacingly,” by March’s account. Though March, too, is offended, he is more concerned by his wife’s response, which he cannot tolerate toward “an elderly relative who, whatever her conduct, had a claim on our respect” (*March*, 129). After sending the children away, March physically restrains his wife, who struggles against him. He clasps his hand over her mouth to silence her and, by “brute strength,” shoves her through the entryway and slams the door in her face. As Marmee beats on the door, March instructs his wife to “Go into the garden...and compose yourself” (*March*, 129). When he joins her there, he finds wife still enraged. “You stifle me! You crush me!” she charges. “You preach emancipation, and yet you enslave me in the most fundamental way. Am I not to have the freedom to express myself, in my

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<sup>43</sup> Weaver, “BOOK BUZZ: Read Between the Lines of ‘Little Women.’”

own home?” Calling herself his “belittled woman,” Marmee invokes the language of slavery and mastery to cast March not as his her saintly helper but the oppressor who stifles her righteous anger. March proves himself the very stultifier of passions Marmee denounces in their early discussion of women’s education (*March* 130-131). During March’s hospitalization, when the narrative shifts to Marmee’s perspective, she recalls with obvious resentment the years of self-repression that the mother of *Little Women* prescribes to Jo.

### **A Fractured Union**

As *March* temporarily adopts Marmee’s point of view, Brooks explores the limits of spousal knowledge and “how you don’t really ever know someone, even someone with whom your life is intimately entwined.”<sup>44</sup> Here, the novel gives voice to Marmee’s frustration over the years of censorship imposed by her husband and her struggle to comprehend March’s lies of omission. March’s earlier narration of his enlistment speech and his loss of fortune suggests that he acted with Marmee’s approval and with the specific purpose of pleasing his wife. Marmee’s memories of these events portray March as oblivious to the pain and hardship he inflicts on his spouse. Though he claims to have supported John Brown “entirely to win her approbation” March keeps this fact to himself, conscious at least that blaming his wife for their poverty “would have been too cruel” (*March*, 125). Marmee considers the loss of fortune and her husband’s inability to provide for their family one of the many ways he has failed her in their married life. She concedes that the money was his to do with as he chose, but she resents that he squandered all of their resources without even thinking to consult her. Marmee’s chapters reveal that March misunderstood what he took for spousal pride the day he pledged to enlist with the Concord youth. Marmee’s unspoken objections are the culmination of the years of

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<sup>44</sup> O’Connor, “Making up March.”

suppressing the “long list of things that a woman must not say.” From his lectern, Marmee recalls, her husband saw her tears and the gesture meant to stop him from announcing his enlistment, but March ignored both and declared his intention to join the army. In March’s recollection of that day, Marmee was “so proud of me that she could not speak, but only took my hand and clasped it, the pressure of her grip hard as a man’s” (*March*, 183). By Marmee’s account, “When he came to me, I could not speak, I took his hand and dug my nails into the flesh of it, wanting to hurt him for the hurt he was inflicting on me” (*March*, 211).<sup>45</sup> With conflicting accounts, the March marriage, which Brooks elevates to the level of national metaphor, represents a country at war and dueling cultural narratives that emerge from that conflict.

From the chaplain who conveys her husband’s belongings, Marmee learns that March has been ailing for some time with recurring bouts of fever he never mentioned in his letters (*March*, 229). When Grace, now working as a nurse in the same Washington hospital, discloses the past she shares with March, Marmee learns the extent of her spouse’s deception, not only in his war correspondence but in all their years of married life. Recalling a favorite toy of Meg’s childhood, a kaleidoscope with colored glass that reconfigured into new patterns at the slightest turn, Marmee reflects, “I felt, as I sat there, that Grace Clement had shattered my marriage into shards, and every sentence she spoke shifted and sorted the pieces into something I did not recognize” (*March*, 240). Marmee tells herself she can forgive her husband’s attraction to Grace, but she does not know if she can “forgive him for the years of silence and the letters filled with lies” (*March*, 244). As Marmee contemplates the discovery of her husband’s deceptions and considers whether she can forgive these betrayals, she conjures the fire-and-ice episode of *Little Women* with the recollection of her maternal counsel, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger” (*March*, 246).

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<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Levasseur similarly notes the contradiction between these two passages; Jennifer Levasseur, “March as a Lion,” review of *March*, by Geraldine Brooks, *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), March 13, 2005, FACTIVA.

Particularly in the hospital chapters, Brooks elevates the March marriage to the level of national metaphor. In the capitol, Marmee observes how the architecture, all “ramshackle or unfinished” gives the appearance of a city “already ruined” (*March*, 215). As she passes the Washington Monument, she reflects, “the obelisk meant to honor the father of the nation...rises like a broken pencil, not one-third built.” When abolitionist ardor expedites their wedding, Brooks associates the March marriage with Thoreau’s desire to manufacture “A Better Pencil,” which also serves as that chapter’s title. The “broken pencil” that marks the capitol skyline as Marmee arrives in Washington foreshadows the Marches’ marital discord and conflates their union with the Union, fractured by civil war. Also reprising the earlier concern with writing and literacy, Brooks chooses as her national writing implement an emblem of impermanence, easily erased. On one level, this symbolism suggests Brooks’s project of rewriting a classic nineteenth century text. It also speaks to the precarious state of the country, its very existence threatened by war and its founding documents, like Zannah’s testimony, in danger of being reduced to little more than illegible “random stains.” The thought occurs to Marmee that “if the fortunes of this war do not turn, then maybe the city is destined to be no more than this: ruins, merely... the shards of an optimistic moment when a few dreamers believed you could build a nation upon ideas such as liberty and equality” (*March*, 216). As Marmee considers the possible demise of the country in terms of “shards” that anticipate her kaleidoscope-marriage metaphor, she attributes to the nation’s founders an idealism not unlike that of her own spouse, whose body becomes a “ruin” after suffering chronic sickness (*March*, 240, 257). These ruminations follow Marmee’s regrets at not voicing her objections when the war began. Now, a year later, she reflects, “I still believe that removing the stain of slavery is worth some suffering—but whose? If our forefathers make the world awry, must our children be the ones who pay to right it?” (*March*, 210). Marmee’s notion of paternal debts is consistent with her ironic vision of the country reunited. Of the wounded Confederates who convalesce in the same hospital as her husband, she remarks, “so there is union at last, a united

states of pain” (*March*, 210). In chapters titled “Reunion” and “Reconstruction,” March’s attraction to Grace destabilizes the March marriage until Marmee learns to sympathize with her spouse through her own failure to write a suitable letter. While “Reunion” and “Reconstruction” connote the aftermath of the Civil War in which sectional reconciliation effectively erased slavery from the national war narrative, March’s shared past with Grace and the failures of his military service are similarly edited out of the March family narrative.

### **An Honest Account Would Hardly Make Fit Reading**

As March regains consciousness, husband and wife argue over his plan to return to duty. After the murder and re-enslavement of his students, March thinks it his obligation to return to the army. Marmee recognizes this as physical impossibility. The disagreement has not been resolved when Marmee is summoned back to Concord to attend Beth, who suffers from scarlet fever. In *Little Women*, Meg feels “very anxious and a little guilty” when she writes letters that do not mention Beth’s illness, but directed by Hannah to spare Mrs. March the worry, Meg must either continue to deceive her mother or defy Marmee’s instruction to obey the family housekeeper. Though adult authority complicates Meg’s predicament, she contends with the same epistolary dilemma that plagues both parents in *March*. Just as Beth’s condition worsens and Meg “[begs] to be allowed to write the truth,” the March daughters receive news of their father’s relapse (*Little Women*, 183). At probably the same time indecision weighs on Alcott’s Meg, Brooks’s Marmee abandons her first attempt to assume the correspondence she has left to her escort John Brooke since their arrival in Washington. As she sits poised to write, Marmee searches unsuccessfully for something to say to her children. Though March has temporarily regained consciousness, his prognosis now appears bleak, and she realizes, “an honest accounting of my hours would hardly make fit reading.” As she cannot report her confrontation with

the incorrigible Nurse Flynn, Grace's account of March's past, or her dismal accommodations, Marmee's search for "a style of truth that would not completely dishearten its recipients" leads her to realize that this was exactly the dilemma her husband faced. She discovers that "the lies had been penned, the truths unwritten" partly from shame but also because he wanted to spare his wife "the grief that an accurate account would have inflicted" (*March*, 248). As she grapples with the same problems of communication, Marmee reevaluates the "letters filled with lies," that no longer seem an unforgivable betrayal. As she forgoes her attempt at "polite words of cheerful consolation," it is unclear from either novel whether Marmee or Brooke finally pens the report of March's relapse, but as the parents in *March* and Meg in *Little Women* face a similar dilemma, the family correspondence proves unreliable in its entirety. Written to comfort and appease, these letters collectively present an idealized narrative of the Civil War. Authorial censorship expurgates illness, conflict, and most significantly, the father's culpability in the slave regime.

### **Christmas Homecoming**

Geraldine Brooks concludes her novel with a rewriting of March's Christmas Day return to his family, where Alcott also ends the first volume of *Little Women*. Brooks retells this homecoming from the perspective of March as a traumatized veteran, haunted by survivor's guilt. Had he been alone and not accompanied by Brooke and Teddy Laurence, March admits, he might have retreated from this reunion. As he approaches their cottage, he feels "like an imposter," that the house he is about to enter belongs to someone else,—“A person of moral certainty, and some measure of wisdom, whom many called courageous.” He asks himself, “How could I masquerade as such a one? For I was a fool, a coward, uncertain of everything” (*March*, 270). After the father has praised the positive changes he has observed in his daughters, Jo asks a question of Beth, and March is grateful that the conversation turns

from him. (*March*, 273).

In Alcott's account of this scene, Jo asks "What are you thinking of, Beth?" and the younger sister answers with the Christian allegory that has sustained the girls in their year of hardship. From that day's reading of *Pilgrim's Progress* Beth recalls "how after many troubles Christian and Hopeful came to a pleasant green meadow, where lilies bloomed all the year round, and there they rested happily, as we do now, before they went on to their journey's end" (*Little Women*, 224). Beth alludes to the arrival of Bunyan's travelers on the banks of the "river of life," described by the Biblical prophet Ezekiel as one that cannot be forded but that will make everything live, wherever it flows.<sup>46</sup>

Understandably, *March* elides this part of the conversation, which contradicts the father's experience of what proved to be an uncrossable river at Ball's Bluff. Instead of life, that river resulted in a death for which March continues to blame himself. Even as he commends each of the girls in turn, his daughters conjure memories of Grace and his students and the child casualties of the guerrilla war. Observing her minor stove burn, the father praises Meg's "scarred, workworn hand" as evidence of her "diligent housework"; all the while, he thinks of little Jimse and his scarred palm (*March*, 272). As he commends Jo for her "newly dignified bearing" and her "careful nursing of her little sister," he longs for the "dignified bearing of that other nurse." As he compliments Amy for her selflessness, he thinks of his student Cilla, who often reminded him of his youngest child but whom he remembers as "that poor little girl, whom I had not been able to keep safe" (*March*, 273). As his "mind reel[s] with the memory of her terrible wounds," he realizes his new reality: "I would do my best to live in the quick world, but the ghosts of the dead would ever be at hand" (*March*, 273). Like the letters that bear little resemblance to the family's lived experience, this final scene reveals the disjuncture between March's outward conduct and his interior consciousness, which is haunted ever after by his unspoken memories of war and slavery.

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<sup>46</sup> Ezekiel 47:5-9.



## The Clements: A Family Tale

If the March family represents one scenario in which the violence of war and the father's complicity in slavery is expurgated from public memory, the suppression of Grace's experience, through March's epistolary misrepresentation and through her own self-censorship, constitutes the most significant silence of the novel. When March first meets Grace, she is nurse to a mistress who sustained a head injury two years earlier. Mrs. Clement suffers fever, cough, and a failing memory. In a repetitive conversation that mimics the symptoms of dementia, Mrs. Clement tells March that she is responsible for Grace's literacy and that she now depends on Grace to read to her. Mrs. Clement also reveals that her husband gave Grace to her as an infant, a wedding gift that she supposes was meant to help her practice her mothering skills. Grace's mother was sold away when Grace was still a baby. March, however, fails to understand Grace's true relation to the Clements until they meet again during the war.

At their second meeting, Grace recounts a "litany of loss" involving the Clements and the people they owned as property. In the autumn of the year March first visited the Clement estate, Mrs. Clement died. Though her death brought an end to Grace's nursing duties, she was not assigned additional household tasks, and Clement refused his daughter's requests to have Grace sent to work in her house. A year later, Clement's son died in a purported hunting accident. According to the scenario Grace first relates, "Apparently, he had got his boot tangled in some honeysuckle thicket and his fowling piece discharged into his face" (*March*, 54). The son's death initiated a "long decline" both of the father's physical health and the Clement estate, with catastrophic consequences for the bondspeople Clement owned. Shortly after the death of the younger Clement, the plantation manager Harris, whose loyalties had been with the son, left to take another job. His replacement embezzled a year's profits. That man was followed by a "brute" whose harsh treatment prompted two slaves to run away—the first time bondspeople had fled the Clement plantation. Eventually, Clement began selling people to satisfy

the estate's expenditures. The day Prudence and Justice were sold, their mother Annie went to the river and "walked out into the channel until the water closed over her head" (*March*, 55). Clement, presumably unable to acknowledge his role, insisted Annie's death was accidental, that she had slipped on the rocks. Finally, according to Grace, when word came that the Union army was camped across the river, half of the remaining bondpeople left. "Why do you not go, too?" asks March, who assumes incorrectly that Grace feels some sense of loyalty to Clement for passing up an opportunity to sell Grace as a concubine. March suggests that Grace could depart and leave the care of Clement to his daughter. Revealing their biological relation, Grace replies, "He has two daughters, Mr. March" (*March*, 55). She adds that she has no illusions about why Clement did not sell her. Displaying the scars of her whipping from twenty years earlier, Grace tells him, "The fancy-girl merchants don't pay for spoiled goods" (*March*, 56).

Additional revelations at the Washington hospital recast Grace's earlier story. Grace's partial confession toward the end of the novel, in which she directs March to stop punishing himself, suggests her sexual assault by Clement's son, her half-brother. She also implies that she had some role in his death, though she is not specific. What Grace considers equally vile, perhaps more so, is that the son acted not only with the elder Clement's approval but by their father's design. The same parent who had Grace flogged retained ownership of his enslaved child with the intention that she would become her brother's concubine. Grace's refusal to give a full accounting of her assault or her role in her brother's death again enacts the suppression of slaves' experience that happens throughout the novel.

What Grace does narrate is the tale of a planter's decline and a story of implied incest and fratricide that conjures familiar themes from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* The little Grace reveals of her experience revises Faulkner's tale of fratricide, in which Henry Sutpen murders his half-sibling to prevent a marriage between Charles Bon and Judith Sutpen. As Eric Sundquist explains in *Faulkner: The House Divided*, Henry kills Charles Bon not as his brother but as "*the nigger that's going to sleep*

*with your sister.*”<sup>47</sup> According to Sundquist, “the potential miscegenation between Bon and Judith cancels out the potential incest.”<sup>48</sup> To acknowledge the potential incest and, thus, the biological relation between Henry, Judith, and Bon would require Henry to “recognize the legitimacy of a paternity his allegiance to his father, and to the South, finally will not permit.”<sup>49</sup> With the racially motivated murder of Charles Bon, Henry continues Thomas Sutpen’s denial of his multiracial son in an era in which, Sundquist notes, “the miscegenation taboo was as strong as, even stronger than, the incest taboo.”<sup>50</sup> In Brooks’s partially told tale of the Clement family, the elder Clement’s denial of paternity and disregard of the incest taboo is precisely what renders Grace’s experience so terrible. A father has his own daughter brutally flogged and plans for her sexual servitude to the son he does acknowledge. In his decision to not to sell Grace or send her to work for his other daughter, incest is Clement’s design. It is also, Brooks implies, the reason for the younger Clement’s death and the beginning of the patriarch’s long decline.

Grace’s implied sexual exploitation brings to fruition what the Jameson brothers of E.L. Doctorow’s *The March* only entertain as a threat toward their enslaved half-sister, who also acts as a caretaker to a stepmother-mistress suffering from an impaired memory. Published within months of Brooks’s *March*, Doctorow’s similarly titled novel also conjures Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* as it contemplates the Civil War and American identity during the early years of the Iraq War.

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<sup>47</sup> Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), 122.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

## Chapter 14

### Freedom and the Crisis of National Identity in E.L. Doctorow's *The March*

E.L. Doctorow's *The March* follows the people who accompany Sherman's army on the March to the Sea and through the Carolinas in the last year of the Civil War. This itinerant civilization includes soldiers, ex-slaves, freedmen refugees, Confederate deserters, a photographer and his free black assistant, an army field surgeon, and a native Georgian who volunteers as a Union nurse. Seeking protection in their proximity to Union forces, ex-bondspeople follow Sherman's army in pursuit the freedom they have recently claimed for themselves. The freedpeople's presence represents the march as an opportunity to realize the nation's highest principles, but the military campaign reflects a loss of morality and humanity, a descent into "mindless mass rage severed from any cause, ideal or moral principle."<sup>1</sup> While *The March* rarely depicts battles between two opposing armies, violence is often committed against prisoners and noncombatants—actions so ethically objectionable, their abhorrence would later be codified in the rules of war established by the Geneva Conventions. Written in the early years of the Iraq War, *The March* portrays characters whose identities are constantly in flux. As former slaves attempt to establish themselves as free citizens, several instances of soldiers changing allegiances and uniforms reflect the larger problem of the nation struggling to preserve its identity. *The March* also revises Faulkner's tale of filial denial with the story of an unacknowledged slave child who confronts her slaveholder father and articulates a profound commentary on the debts of slavery. Doctorow also suggests the very existence of slavery, the country's betrayal of African Americans, and the process of cultural memory formation after the Civil War as symptoms of a destructive national dementia.

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<sup>1</sup> E.L. Doctorow, *The March* (2005; repr., New York: Random House, 2006), 298. Hereafter this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as *The March*.

When it was published in September 2005, one reviewer described *The March* as Doctorow's "masterwork" and the "first American masterpiece of the young millennium."<sup>2</sup> Though the rare critic placed Doctorow among the most distinguished writers of the Civil War, much of the initial criticism sought to situate *The March* within the author's own oeuvre. His life's work, one reviewer explained, has been an examination of U.S. history, "showing, through characterization, how we have become the country we are today."<sup>3</sup> If Doctorow's novels were arranged in chronological order of their setting, they would collectively depict 150 years of American history.<sup>4</sup> Though he says he "never consciously intended" for his novels to "play out as an American saga," Doctorow realized early on that time and place were equally important in organizing works of fiction. "And if I set a novel in New York, or the South, the Midwest or the West," he told an interviewer, "it was because that was where the historical period was at its hottest. Where the national identity was most expressive."<sup>5</sup> In 1865, he said, that place was the route of Sherman's army through Georgia and the Carolinas.<sup>6</sup>

In *The March*, Doctorow employs an omniscient third-person narrator who shifts back and forth between about a dozen of the most prominent characters.<sup>7</sup> For that technique and the novel's panoramic scope, Doctorow likens *The March* to a nineteenth century Russian novel.<sup>8</sup> Not coincidentally, he admires Chekhov as the "most natural...most unforced ...most truthful, honest voice that has ever come

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Mayer, "E.L. Doctorow Has Written the First Masterpiece of the 21st Century," *The Santa Fe (NM) New Mexican*, September 25, 2005, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent D. Balitas, "War Regarded as Human Insanity, in Bloody Detail," *The Washington Times*, September 11, 2005, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>4</sup> David Walton, "A Novel in the Old Style," *St. Petersburg (FL) Times*, September 25, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; "A Discussion with Author E.L. Doctorow," interview by Charlie Rose, *The Charlie Rose Show*, January 2, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

out of any literature.”<sup>9</sup> As in his earlier novels, Doctorow blends fictional versions of real historical figures with characters of his own invention. His General Sherman, for instance, is a bereaved father who finds temporary solace in the company of Pearl, a fifteen year-old ex-slave who poses as a Union drummer boy and reminds the general of his dead son. The biological child of her former master and now-deceased slave mother, Pearl is born of Doctorow’s imagination but is also the historically authentic progeny of slavery’s sexual politics. Her moral sensibility is exceeded, perhaps, only by Lincoln. He appears in a brief but poignant meeting with army surgeon Wrede Sartorius, a character Doctorow reprises from his novel *The Waterworks* and who eventually attends the president on his deathbed. Among the ex-slaves attached to Sherman’s army, Doctorow also introduces the likely parents of Coalhouse Walker, Jr., the tragic hero of his novel *Ragtime*.

About twenty years before the publication of *The March*, Doctorow read an account of William Sherman’s campaign and thought the operation would make a good premise for a novel.<sup>10</sup> Even as he focused on other projects, Doctorow found himself reading the memoirs of Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant—both “wonderful writers,” in his estimation.<sup>11</sup> When Doctorow finally turned his attention to the Civil War, he was fascinated by the idea of a society transformed and by the reality that for civilian refugees, particularly ex-slaves, the best hope of security lay with the massive moving force of Sherman’s army.<sup>12</sup> Some reviewers noted an uncanny similarity between the experience Doctorow

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Other literary influences include Nathaniel Hawthorne; Herman Melville; Mark Twain, whose entire body of work Doctorow had read by the time he was fourteen or fifteen; and Theodore Dreiser, whose *Sister Carrie* Doctorow considers “the greatest first novel ever written by an American.” Among twentieth century writers, Doctorow also admires F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Saul Bellow.

<sup>10</sup> In tracing the origins of the novel, Doctorow repeatedly credits the work of Joseph Glatthaar, who was also asked by Doctorow’s publisher to proofread the completed manuscript of *The March*. Ibid.; David Segal, “The Time Travels of E.L. Doctorow: With ‘The March,’ the Novelist Continues to Invent the World as it really Was,” *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Bob Thompson, “Doctorow’s ‘The March’ Wins Top Honor: Pen/Faulkner Award is Novelist’s Second,” *The Washington Post*, February 21, 2006, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>11</sup> Doctorow and Rose, “A Discussion with Author E.L. Doctorow.”

<sup>12</sup> John F. Baker, “Doctorow’s ‘60s; the Novelist Talks about Last Century’s Culture Wars and the Previous Century’s Civil

captures in *The March* and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which slammed into the Gulf coast less than a month before the novel's publication.<sup>13</sup> "Doctorow," one critic asserted, "writes like a visionary poet whose gaze encompasses American history past, present and to come." With such demonstrated insight, the critic conceded, "it's easy for me to believe that even as he was imagining these scenes from the Civil War, he was also foretelling the New Orleans disaster when once again the democratic crowd would dissolve into a free-floating mass."<sup>14</sup> Of course, Doctorow could not have predicted that specific disaster, but the seeming prescience of his novel may be explained by his concept of U.S. history.

In July 2008, during an appearance at the Chautauqua Institution in New York, Doctorow was asked to explain his understanding of the American Dream. "In general terms," he replied, the American Dream is "what the possibilities of life [are] as they emerge out of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights." He added, "American history is characterized by the fact that that dream is often not realized because of certain political and economic pressures that exist in any given decade." He then told a story of how citizens turned out to celebrate when the Constitution was ratified. Nearly every community held parades. People of every vocation and economic class marched in a proud act of civic participation. In some of the larger cities, the processions included floats. Philadelphia featured a giant

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War (and His New Book)," *Publishers Weekly*, September 12, 2005, 25, LexisNexis Academic; Walton, "A Novel in the Old Style"; Karen Heller, "Doctorow's Time Travels 'March' Forth," *Philadelphia (PA) Inquirer*, October 5, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Daniel Yee, "Doctorow's Latest Novel Explores Burning of Atlanta During Civil War," *The Associated Press*, October 12, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; "E.L. Doctorow Discusses Sherman and 'The March,'" transcript of interview by Robert Siegel, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio (NPR), October 18, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Jerome Weeks, "Surviving 'March': E.L. Doctorow Recalls His Struggle to Write the Story of Gen. Tecumseh Sherman," *The Dallas (TX) Morning News*, January 11, 2006, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>13</sup> Sam Coale, "Capturing the Chaos of Sherman's March," *The Providence (RI) Journal*, sec. ARTS, September 25, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Todd Leopold, "A Long Road to Death and Glory," CNN.com, October 31, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Vikas Turakhia, "Doctorow's 'March' Puts Lives into Civil War Story," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), September 20, 2006, LexisNexis Academic; Stephen Matchett, "Power of the Patriot," *Weekend Australian*, September 30, 2006, LexisNexis Academic; Celia Mcee, "Troubled Campaign: Idealized Blacks Mar Doctorow's Civil War Novel," *Daily News* (New York), September 18, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; John Freeman, "For Writer Doctorow, the Past is a Living Thing," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), October 2, 2005, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>14</sup> "E.L. Doctorow's New Novel 'The March,'" transcript of review by Maureen Corrigan, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio (NPR), September 28, 2005, LexisNexis Academic.

cupola drawn by ten white horses with a cornucopia figure at the top. The float was called “The New Roof,” and it symbolized the bounty of the new nation. But the history of the nation, Doctorow told his audience, is “in detail, how often the shelter of ‘The New Roof’ is denied to people.” He cited examples of opposition to worker’s unions in the early twentieth century, discrimination against immigrants, striking steel workers in Pittsburgh being shot by Pinkerton detectives, and the obstruction of important legislation by lobbyists and special interests. “In all these ways, really,” Doctorow concluded, “the history of the country is our attempt to live up to the Constitution, and we really haven’t done that yet for everyone.”<sup>15</sup>

The story of the Constitutional ratification parades is central to Doctorow’s understanding of American identity and to the significance of the many processions that appear in *The March*. Doctorow first told the story in his 1987 essay, “A Citizen Reads the Constitution.” In his textual analysis of that document, Doctorow does not find the “radical voice of national liberation” contained in the Declaration of Independence, but rather the “solemn self-conscious” voice of a people “giving law unto themselves.”<sup>16</sup> During the Constitutional Convention, he supposes, delegates must have begun to feel a collective identity beyond their state affiliations, “a rising sense of their identity...as American nationals,” which is evidenced in the preamble phrase “We the people of the United States.”<sup>17</sup> The essential verb in the Constitution, Doctorow observes, is shall. By this syntax, the Constitution, “prescribes,” “prophecies,” and “[extends] itself” perpetually into the future. And though it makes no mention of God, like all law-giving entities in the Judeo-Christian tradition of Western civilization, the Constitution “imitates God—God being the ultimate lawgiver.” Assuming “the character of scripture,”

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<sup>15</sup> “Q9: American Dream,” *E.L. Doctorow in Conversation with Roger Rosenblatt*, Chautauqua Institution, July 8, 2008. FORA.tv, [http://fora.tv/2008/07/08/EL\\_Doctorow\\_in\\_Conversation\\_with\\_Roger\\_Rosenblatt](http://fora.tv/2008/07/08/EL_Doctorow_in_Conversation_with_Roger_Rosenblatt).

<sup>16</sup> E. L. Doctorow, “A Citizen Reads the Constitution,” *Nation*, February 21, 1987, 208, 212, EBSCO Nation Archives (14137772).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.



Doctorow says, the Constitution “presents itself as the sacred text of secular humanism,” which like other sacred texts—the Torah, the Koran, the Gospels—“dispenses not just social order but spiritual identity.”<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, Doctorow explains, sacred texts also “create a larger community of the excluded.” The framers of the Constitution were generally not of a working class. They were educated, wealthy men who also established an economic system that would serve their own interests. Among the compromises made by Constitutional Convention was Article Four. “There is no mention of the word *slave*,” Doctorow writes, yet under that provision—an economic deal worked out by the Constitutional writers—“a slave in one state became a slave in all.” George Mason, who refused to sign the document both because of the slavery clause and because it lacked a bill of rights, issued an ominous warning to his colleagues: “By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, Providence punishes national sins by national calamities.” In an account that anticipates *The March* by nearly two decades, Doctorow writes, “That odious article worked through a historic chain of cause and effect like a powder fuse, until the country blew apart seventy-five years later in civil war.”<sup>19</sup> As Doctorow observes, “the monumental cost in lives, black and white, of that war, and the cost to the black people, the tragedy of their life in the antebellum south, and to American blacks everywhere since then...shows how potent, how malignly powerful, the futuristic, transhuman Constitution has been where it has been poorly written.” Much as he would in his subsequent discussion of the American Dream, Doctorow explains that the sacred text of the Constitution has not and cannot be fully realized “until all the relations among the American people, legal relations, property relations, are made just.” He then turns to the scene two hundred years earlier of citizens marching in the streets of Philadelphia. They were compelled, he says, by a “faith that America was unprecedented.” Finally, Doctorow asserts his hope that in the Constitution’s

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 214.

bicentennial year, “the prevailing image will be of those plain people taking to the streets, those people with only their wit and their skills to lead them through their lives, forming their processions.”<sup>20</sup> More than twenty years later, Doctorow continued to conjure the tableau of people marching in the streets as the epitome of American democracy.

In *Reporting the Universe*, the 2003 book based on lectures he delivered at Harvard in 2000, Doctorow again recalled the ratification parades as “sacramental—symbolic veneration, acts of faith” by people who understood the Constitution as a kind of “sacred text for a civil society.”<sup>21</sup> This later, more ominous invocation recalls, “When the ancient Hebrews broke their covenant they suffered a loss of identity and brought disaster on themselves.”<sup>22</sup> Doctorow went on to note how “we have brutally excluded vast numbers of us from the shelter of the New Roof,” and thus “broken our covenant again and again with a virtuosity verging on damnation.” The country and its people, he wrote, have “only been saved by the sacrificial efforts of Constitution-reverencing patriots.” Among them, Doctorow counted “presidents, senators, justices, self-improving lawyers, abolitionists, muckrakers, third party candidates, suffragists, union organizers, striking workers, [and] civil rights martyrs.”<sup>23</sup> Yet in 2003, Doctorow found his country “increasingly difficult to recognize.” Among his pressing concerns was the country’s response to terrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks. “Given the threat of international terrorism,” Doctorow wrote, “measures endorsed by the Congress, under presidential goading, call for secret military tribunals, abrogate the confidential relations between legal defendants and their counsel, allow indeterminate periods of incommunicado detention for people suspected of crimes, and install legal means for the secret surveillance and secret searches of the homes

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 217.

<sup>21</sup> E.L. Doctorow, *Reporting the Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 100.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 102.

and offices of persons who come for one reason or another under official suspicion.”<sup>24</sup> Later that same year, the United States invaded Iraq under the pretense that the country’s dictator, Saddam Hussein, possessed weapons of mass destruction, though none were ever found. By the time Doctorow appeared on the Chautauqua stage in 2008, his public statements and writings suggest he was increasingly alarmed by the state of the country. As he concluded his insights into the American Dream, Doctorow—referring to President George W. Bush—added, “This guy who’s in there now...[is] actually bleeding the Constitution, cutting into it, chopping it up. Very dangerous. Very, very dangerous.”<sup>25</sup>

It was not the first time Doctorow had harsh words for a president. In 2004, at Hofstra University, Doctorow was booed as he delivered a commencement address that criticized President Bush for telling “bad stories,” including the false claim that Iraq possessed nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. “That was an exciting story all right,” Doctorow told the crowd. “It was designed to send shivers up our spines. But it was not true.” Some questioned the appropriateness of the venue for such politicized remarks, but Doctorow said his point was that just because something is said by a person in a position of authority does not mean the assertion should not be challenged.<sup>26</sup> In January 1991, the week before the United States launched his first strikes of the Persian Gulf War, Doctorow published an open letter to President George H.W. Bush urging him not to launch the military assault. He cited a rumor that the Quartermaster Corps of the Army had ordered 80,000 body bags in anticipation of casualties. Doctorow wrote in part, “I have not heard you say that our basic survival and identity as a nation are at issue here. It is no longer a chief executive’s license to articulate a national

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>25</sup>“Q9: American Dream,” *E.L. Doctorow in Conversation with Roger Rosenblatt*.

<sup>26</sup> Linton Weeks, “E.L. Doctorow, Booed but Unbowed: After His Hofstra Heckling, No Regrets,” *The Washington Post*, May 25, 2004: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A53279-2004May24.html>.

interest, other than our basic survival, that requires the death of 80,000 young men and women.”<sup>27</sup>

During the administration of George W. Bush, Doctorow apparently did find the survival of the nation to be at issue, though its greatest threat, according to Doctorow, was the president himself. In characterizing Bush’s actions as a kind of Constitutional dismemberment, Doctorow accused the president of destroying the sacred text he had sworn to defend. In September 2004, Doctorow wrote a guest column for the *East Hampton Star* in which he argued that the Iraq War was primarily a political maneuver by the president and his cabal, who sought a wartime rally-round-the-flag in order to seize and retain power. The central theme of the editorial was that Bush was impervious to the human cost of the war. The essay titled “The Unfeeling President” supposed that Bush lacked genuine pathos and interpreted that deficiency as a moral failing of the president and the country. Before D-Day, Doctorow wrote, General Dwight Eisenhower prayed for the soldiers he knew would die under his command: “Even in a justifiable war, a war not of choice but of necessity,”—which, to the author, Iraq was not—“the cost was almost more than Eisenhower could bear.” To this image of Eisenhower praying, agonizing over the young lives he would lead to their untimely end, Doctorow juxtaposes two tableaux of Bush, one of a would-be comedian feigning to look under office furniture for “weapons of mass destruction he can’t seem to find,” the other of a “triumphal...he-man” appearing momentarily “solemn” as he talks of “brave young Americans” making “the ultimate sacrifice.”<sup>28</sup> Speaking at the 2004 Radio and Television Correspondents Association Dinner, Bush presented a slideshow that included a photo of him checking under office furniture as he joked, “Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be somewhere...Nope, no weapons over there. Maybe under here.”<sup>29</sup> In his

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<sup>27</sup> E. L. Doctorow, “Open Letter to the President,” *Nation*, January 7, 1991, 1-6, EBSCO Nation Archives (9101212301).

<sup>28</sup> E.L. Doctorow, “The Unfeeling President,” *East Hampton Star* (Long Island, NY) September 9, 2004, <http://easthamptonstar.com> (Accessed March 1, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Video of 2004 Radio and Television Correspondents Association Dinner, March 24, 2004, C-Span Video Library, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/181100-1>.

editorial, Doctorow suggests Bush's moments of solemnity as the affectations of a man who, Doctorow insists, "does not feel a personal responsibility" and "never mourns for the dead and crippled youngsters who have fought this war of his choice." Perhaps most instructive for interpreting *The March* is an assertion Doctorow first advanced in the election year 1992 and repeats verbatim in the *Star* editorial. Defining the president's relation to national identity, Doctorow writes, "The president we get is the country we get. With each president the nation is conformed spiritually. He is the artificer of our malleable national soul." In Bush the younger, whom the author accuses of "choking the life out of [democracy]," Doctorow finds a president who "cannot mourn but is a figure of such moral vacancy as to make us mourn for ourselves."<sup>30</sup>

The importance Doctorow places on a leader's ability to mourn, the degree of personal responsibility one feels for the loss of life, and the president's role as craftsman of the national soul suggests the importance of the presidential figure of *The March*. During their brief meeting, army surgeon Wrede Sartorius observes the comportment of Abraham Lincoln and initially likens it to the demeanor of "an elderly woman," a quality that in the doctor's estimation does not befit the presidential office. Sartorius notes Lincoln's fear of war, his dread that the Civil War will go on indefinitely, and the deference Lincoln shows subordinates (*The March*, 331). Sartorius mistakes these qualities for signs of weakness but eventually reconsiders his conclusions. "Mr. Lincoln's humility," Sartorius realizes, "seemed to have been like a favor to his guests, that they would not see the darkling plain where he dwelled" (*The March*, 334-335). According to the doctor, "The moral capacity of the President made it difficult to be in his company." Upon meeting Lincoln, Sartorius observes the president's "overdeveloped extremities," "rude features," and "terribly careworn appearance," as though they are symptoms of a "hereditary disease." The medical visionary who predicts penicillin,

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<sup>30</sup> E.L. Doctorow, "The Unfeeling President." The same assertion appears in E. L. Doctorow, "The Character of Presidents," *Nation*, November 9, 1992, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (9211161148) and in E.L Doctorow, "The White Whale," *Nation*, July 14, 2008, 29, EBSCO Academic Search Premier (32814669).

blood transfusions, and x-rays also seems to anticipate speculation that Lincoln may have suffered from Marfan syndrome, but the doctor surmises that a genetic condition alone could not account for the President's obvious "agony" (*The March*, 335).<sup>31</sup> "A proper diagnosis," the doctor concludes, "was not in the realm of science. His affliction might, after all, be the wounds of the war he'd gathered into himself, the amassed miseries of this torn-apart country made incarnate" (*The March*, 335). Earlier in the novel, when Emily Thompson suggests a patient's mental infirmity as an "affliction of the soul," Sartorius rejects the concept of the soul as a "poetic fancy" with "no basis in fact." Later, as the doctor attempts to account for what science alone cannot explain, his diagnosis of Lincoln's malady sounds remarkably like the soul affliction he had been so quick to dismiss. In the doctor's revised formula, Lincoln personifies the nation and all of its sorrow. Doctorow's Lincoln surpasses even the grief-stricken General Eisenhower and becomes a presidential Christ figure who absorbs and embodies the nation's collective suffering. The Lincoln of *The March* is so much the antithesis of "The Unfeeling President," one might suppose this immensely moral, humble figure, who dreads war even when it is most necessary, is at least partly the product of authorial wish fulfillment, as though in creating his fictional Lincoln, Doctorow imagined the "artificer of the national soul" he desired for the country instead of the one it had at the time.

The portrayal of Lincoln is doubly significant as related from the perspective of Wrede Sartorius, a character Doctorow reprises from his novel *The Waterworks* and who has been described as the "embodiment of cold-blooded science."<sup>32</sup> The Sartorius of *The March* is jilted by Emily Thompson for his apparent lack of emotion. At one point, as Sartorius treats the internal injuries of a rape victim, Emily Thompson "[looks] for some recognizable emotion from him." When she detects none,

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<sup>31</sup> For discussion of scholarship on Lincoln and Marfan Syndrome, see Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 250, n.22.

<sup>32</sup> For description of Sartorius, see John Updike, "A Cloud of Dust: E. L. Doctorow's the March," *The New Yorker*, September 12, 2005, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/09/12/050912crbo\\_books](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/09/12/050912crbo_books).

Thompson concludes that Sartorius is not a doctor at all but “a magus bent on tampering with the created universe” (*The March*, 189-190). Yet in his encounter with Lincoln, the president’s overwhelming visible suffering not only compels Sartorius to seek an explanation beyond science, it stirs the pathos that Emily considers lacking in the doctor. Though he had “attended every kind of battle death,” Sartorius cannot “recall having ever before felt this sad for another human being” (*The March*, 335). Doctorow’s Lincoln becomes the exemplar of presidential character, who elicits emotion even in the most war-hardened battlefield surgeons.

From published accounts, it is not clear which began first, the writing of *The March* or the U.S. invasion of Iraq. But of the national and international protests that operation sparked, Doctorow wrote in the *East Hampton Star*, “I remember the millions of people here and around the world who marched against the war.” It was, he says, an “extraordinary” phenomenon, given that wars happen “all over the world most of the time” without inciting global protests. This outcry, insisted Doctorow, was the “appalled understanding of millions of people that America was ceding its role as the last best hope of mankind.” “It was their perception,” he explains, “that the classic archetype of democracy was morphing into a rogue nation,” and “The greatest democratic republic in history was turning its back on the future.”<sup>33</sup> For Doctorow, the U.S. invasion of Iraq was a re-defining moment in which the United States seemed to abandon its future and all sense of itself. In the “The Unfeeling President” E.L. Doctorow sounds for all the world like someone convinced he is witnessing the death throes of U.S. democracy.

In that context, Doctorow, the longtime arbiter of American identity, turned to an earlier moment of national crisis, when extralegal secession threatened to dissolve the Union and undermine self-government for all time. “The last best hope,” in fact, was how Lincoln characterized the nation in his second Annual Message to Congress, which outlined his plan for emancipation and enlistment of

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<sup>33</sup> Doctorow, “The Unfeeling President.”

African American soldiers.<sup>34</sup> Dissolution of that Union by means of Confederate secession would have signaled to the world that self-government was unsustainable. Though Doctorow said he “had no conscious intention of drawing an analogy” to the Iraq War, he acknowledged that “whenever you write about the past, obviously you’re going to reflect the present” and left it to readers to identify the parallels.<sup>35</sup> While the novel’s title succinctly conveys its narrative premise—Sherman’s campaign, a civilization on the move—*The March* also conjures the citizen masses who took to the streets, first in celebration of their new republic and later in protest of its alarming transformation.

### **“You are All Free”: Moments of Liberation**

The first sentence Doctorow ever composed for *The March* appears exactly as he wrote it in the opening lines of the novel.<sup>36</sup> The narrative begins with a slaveholder’s frantic flight from Sherman’s army. The imminent arrival of troops is announced by Mattie Jameson’s aunt. Letitia Pettibone shares a surname with the planter of *Absalom, Absalom!* whose vicarious affront spawns Thomas Sutpen’s dynastic ambitions. As the Jamesons decamp under the watchful eye of Pearl, the enslaved daughter of the elder John Jameson awaits some acknowledgement from her master/father, a sign that in true Faulknerian fashion, Jameson never makes. While the story of the ill-fated Sutpens faintly echoes through the opening pages of *The March*, the Jamesons’ hasty retreat also signals Doctorow’s departure from *Absalom* with a family saga he narrates primarily from the perspective of fifteen-year-old Pearl. She is widely considered the most sympathetic character of *The March* and the one who comes closest

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<sup>34</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress,” December 1, 1862, in Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings*, 1859-1865, Library of America edition with notes by Don Fehrenbacher (New York: Literary Classics of the United States : Distributed by Viking Press, 1989), 415.

<sup>35</sup> Adam Begley, “E.L. Doctorow,” *New York Observer*, December 19, 2005, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>36</sup> Doctorow and Rose, “A Discussion with Author E.L. Doctorow.”



to being the novel's protagonist.<sup>37</sup>

With minimal explanation, multiple reviewers have suggested Doctorow's Pearl as an allusion to the child of *The Scarlett Letter*.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, both Pearls are born of adulterous, though not entirely analogous, relationships—whatever patriarchal authority Arthur Dimmesdale represents as Hester Prynne's minister, theirs was not the relationship of master and chattel property. Both Pearls experience outcast childhoods, and both reproach their fathers for their moral and parental failings. In this respect, Pearl Wilkins Jameson most closely resembles Hawthorne's Pearl, who presses for a public acknowledgement from the father who denies his paternity. During a late-night encounter on the platform where Hester Prynne endured her first hour of public disgrace, Hawthorne's Pearl asks the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, "Wilt thou stand here with mother and me tomorrow noontide?" "Nay, not so, my little Pearl!" answers the minister, who claims he will stand with them "one other day, but not tomorrow." "But wilt thou promise...to take my hand, and mother's hand tomorrow noontide?" the child persists. His reply, that they will be together on "the great judgment day," suggests that while he considers divine punishment inescapable, Dimmesdale remains unwilling to acknowledge Pearl as his child or share in the scorn Pearl and Hester endure from their Puritan community.<sup>39</sup>

In *The March*, John Jameson, Sr., is the only recurring slave owner and the figure most incapable of human sympathy, the deficiency Doctorow elsewhere likens to moral bankruptcy. Jameson's cruelty is revealed in the reflections of the daughter he denied and the wife he betrayed. Early recollections from Mattie's point of view depict John, Sr. as verbally abusive, difficult to please,

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<sup>37</sup> Begley, "E.L. Doctorow"; Harper Barnes, "E. L. Doctorow Reignites Sherman's Bloody Campaign through South," *St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch*, September 18, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Randy Boyagoda, "When the World is Fire and Death: Fiction," *National Post* (Canada), October 15, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Jeffrey Tannenbaum, "'March' has Panorama but Little Suspense," *Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk, VA), October 2, 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Balitas, "War Regarded as Human Insanity, in Bloody Detail"; Barnes, "E. L. Doctorow Reignites Sherman's Bloody Campaign through South"; Boyagoda, "When the World is Fire and Death"; Tannenbaum, "March has Panorama but Little Suspense."

<sup>39</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 172-173.

and an adulterer who forbids Mattie to extend any gesture of kindness to Pearl. In preparation for Sherman's arrival, Jameson attempts to preserve the spoils of his slaves' labor by shipping the family's valuables to a cotton warehouse in Savannah for safekeeping (*The March*, 5). Once the crops are harvested, he sells twelve prime field hands to a slave trader from Columbia, South Carolina. Mattie says nothing to oppose her husband, but as the men are shackled and loaded into the trader's wagon, she runs upstairs and covers her ears to muffle the wails of families who are about to be separated. As insensitive to those slaves' emotional pain as he is to that of his own daughter, John Jameson simply declares, "No buck nigger of mine will wear a Federal uniform, I'll promise you that" (*The March*, 6). Later, as an evacuee in Savannah, Jameson disappears with the family's longtime slave Roscoe. When he returns alone, the only explanation Jameson offers Mattie is that that he had "got the best of Roscoe and what was left wasn't worth providing for" (*The March*, 107). The response couples Jameson's well-documented callousness with a specious claim of planter paternalism. It does not, however, reveal what happened to Roscoe. His fate remains shrouded in secrecy that implies an unspeakable end.

Aside from her mother, Roscoe is the only person who shows Pearl any kindness at the Jameson estate. When Pearl last sees Roscoe, he is driving the second carriage in the Jamesons' flight from Fieldstone. As he passes his former charge, he tosses a knotted handkerchief at her feet. Inside are two twenty-dollar gold coins, Roscoe's entire life savings.<sup>40</sup> His bequest to the otherwise friendless Pearl is meant to sustain her in her new and uncertain life as a free woman. Instead, it comes to represent a moral economy in which the labor of a lifelong slave and possible murder victim purchases the life and freedom of his former enslavers.

Pearl's emancipation from legal bondage, signaled by the Jameson's departure, is one of several instances in which Doctorow imagines the defining moment bondspeople cease to be enslaved. Pearl's first act is to visit her mother's grave, where she prays for her parent and for divine guidance to find her

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<sup>40</sup> Doctorow does not explain how Roscoe amassed this sum.

way as a free person (*The March*, 8). In the house of the just-deceased Judge Horace Thompson, the bondswoman Wilma Jones emerges dressed for traveling. Though the two women had grown up together, the judge's daughter Emily studies Wilma as though she has never seen the departing slave. Wilma is unrecognizable to the mistress, Doctorow implies, because "there was nothing deferential about her" (*The March*, 33). As Marcus Aurelius Thompson attempts to make his way to his brother's side, unaware that the judge has already died, he offers to confer freedom upon the slave woman Sophie. In doing so, Marcus Thompson evokes the Biblical Exodus, compares himself to Pharaoh, and casts the destruction of his slaveholding civilization as an act of divine will. (*The March*, 54). He tells Sophie, "It was God who did this, with the Union as his instrument" (*The March*, 54). Rather than simply the Union army, Marcus Thompson seems to invoke the United States and the ideals of its founding as God's instrument in punishing the slaveholding South. Marcus resists the impulse of fictional slaveholders past to vilify Federal forces and instead implies a shared culpability for the destruction.

Though Marcus does not indict the U.S. Army as perpetrators of a destroyed South, Doctorow minimizes the army's role in the liberation of bondspeople. In one glaring example, the opportunistic General Kilpatrick follows the aroma of simmering stew and barges into a kitchen occupied by several former slaves. He slurps from the communal serving ladle and finds the meal much to his liking. Almost as an afterthought, he turns to the frightened diners and declares, "You all are free," a fact they probably have surmised, since the owners have abandoned the main house. (*The March*, 162). Following his superfluous announcement, Kilpatrick administers the oath of enlistment to the French Creole cook Jean-Pierre and assigns him duties as Sargent of the Mess (*The March*, 162). In one breath, Kilpatrick imparts freedom; in the next, he divests it from the cook with a conscription that lacks any volition from Jean-Pierre. "All the rights and privileges" supposed to accompany the new position likely translate to none at all, as Kilpatrick presses Jean-Pierre into a new form of unfreedom, merely

to indulge the general's culinary appetites.

In another episode, a slaveowner warns his slaves against pursuing their freedom with a Union army he denounces as “thieves” and “beggars.” The core of his argument is slaveholder paternalism: “You be on your own and God help you, because I won’t. You won’t have the Massah to take care of you no more” (*The March*, 219). Few of the bondspeople decide to depart with the army, and the “old planter’s awful mental control of his slaves” is received as a “de facto insult” to men who fancy themselves “Union liberationists come to free [the slaves]” (*The March*, 221). One notable exception is an eight-year-old boy David, who is chased out of the house by a woman brandishing a whip. Fleeing his enslavers, David raises his arms to be taken up by British war correspondent Hugh Pryce, who admires the child for doing what was “beyond the capacity of most of the slaves on that plantation”—“assert[ing] his life to be his own” (*The March*, 225). Later when the burden of childcare hinders Pryce’s reporting, the journalist revises his understanding of David’s “instinctive dash to freedom” and convinces himself that the boy was merely running from a whipping. Pryce speculates that the punishment was probably even deserved. By devaluing what he earlier regarded as a heroic act, Pryce rationalizes abandoning the boy, whom he lifted onto his horse with too little regard for the responsibility it might entail.

## War Crimes

When the woman who chases David out of the house inadvertently strikes a soldier with her whip, that blow provokes a reprisal from the soldier, whose beating escalates into a “military event,” or, more accurately, a sexual assault in which several of the soldiers participate. Earlier in Columbia, a gang of Federal soldiers rape an anonymous black woman and possibly a second. One of the victims, battered and unconscious, is taken to Sartorius’s dispensary where she dies of her injuries. In both

accounts of sexual assaults, the soldiers' superiors are aware of the attacks but do nothing to intervene. Their willingness to permit the assaults are extreme examples of the command philosophy Lt. Clarke acknowledges early in the novel, when his troops loot and burn Fieldstone: "The best officers knew when to look aside" (*The March*, 11).

Since the 1980s, feature films have adopted a similar negative portrayal of Union soldiers in the Civil War, which also bears a striking similarity to Hollywood's rendering of the American soldier in Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> Films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and others, according to historian Gary Gallagher, depict U.S. soldiers as "unrestrained warriors."<sup>42</sup> To be sure, Doctorow also extends this image to Confederate soldiers and civilians. The slaying of Federal prisoners, including Lt. Clarke, and the executions discovered by Kilpatrick's foraging party quite literally leave trails of blood and bodies where no battle occurred. In Sandersonville, Clarke and a dozen of his soldiers are captured by Confederate forces and taken to the local jail. Attempting to "put the best face on things," Clarke suggests they might be sent to Confederate prison camp at Millen. Noting that the camp is along the route of Sherman's March, Clarke assures his troops, "We'll be sent to Millen and in a few days the armies will overrun it and we'll be back on duty" (*The March*, 49). Pearl, who travels with Clarke's company in the guise of a drummer boy hides in a wagon during their encounter with Confederate forces. When none of the soldiers return, she ventures into town in search of Clarke. She discovers the road covered in blood, which leads to the doors of the jail. She discovers the bodies of Lt. Clarke and his men in a nearby field, where they evidently have been dragged after being murdered in the jail. Pearl watches as the townspeople return with their wagons and transport the dead to the cemetery, where they spend most of the night burying bodies and, thus, concealing the executions (*The March* 50,

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<sup>41</sup> Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won Lost and Forgotten: How Hollywood & Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 124.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

72).

In another episode, Kilpatrick's troops discover the bodies of a dozen Union cavalymen, including one found tied to a tree with a note in his pocket that reads, "THESE WERE THE RAPISTS." In apparent retaliation for the assault of the whip-wielding planter woman, most of the dead Union troops, Doctorow writes, have "had their hands tied behind them and their throats cut" (*The March*, 231). Further on, Kilpatrick and his men discover nine more executed soldiers. Observing that "our foragers were murdered after they surrendered," Kilpatrick states his intention to demand an investigation from General Wheeler. If the Confederate general does not comply, Kilpatrick says he will "execute one Rebel prisoner for every man lying here" (*The March*, 232). Sherman prevents Kilpatrick from carrying out his threat, but after a member of an advanced patrol is captured and shot by retreating Confederates who hang his body from a lamppost, Sherman orders the "public execution of a Confederate prisoner chosen by lot." In Sherman's estimation, putting the prisoner to death is the best way to communicate the consequences of Confederates murdering captured Union soldiers (*The March*, 242-243). In an earlier episode Sherman orders Confederate prisoners to clear a minefield. He tells them, "You will find every mine planted there ... or be blown up in the process" (*The March*, 81). After one of the novel's few engagements at Bentonville, wounded soldiers who cannot bear the pain of their injuries beg to be shot; when Sartorius agrees the case is "hopeless," the men are "taken out in the darkness and accommodated" (*The March*, 310).

Murders and executions of captured enemy soldiers, Sherman's use of prisoners to clear minefields, and the killing of hopelessly injured patients are actions that were eventually condemned in the treaties of the Geneva Conventions. The first of the international summits establishing rules for the treatment of enemy soldiers was held in 1864, just prior to the march to Savannah. Most of the guidelines dealt with the obligation to provide medical treatment for enemy soldiers. The United States ratified the treaty in 1889. In 1949, a series of four conventions provided a comprehensive update to

existing rules governing the treatment of prisoners. The treaty of the Third Geneva Convention guarantees humane treatment for “persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause.” Among other acts, the treaty prohibits “violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds” as well as “the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court.”<sup>43</sup> A separate treaty governing wartime medical treatment prohibits the killing of wounded soldiers and subjecting them to medical experiments. By providing medical care to both Union and Confederate soldiers, Sartorius already complies with some future guidelines, but the field hospital’s practice of euthanizing terminal patients at their request and perhaps even Sartorius’s treatment of Albion Simms also constitutes a violation of the Geneva Conventions. In other words, Doctorow’s Civil War primarily consists of acts that subsequent generations defined as war crimes. Writing in an era when the rules of war had long been defined by the Geneva Conventions, Doctorow represents the Civil War as a series of atrocities that are also transgressions of current international law. The novel’s emphasis on actions now considered human rights violations was particularly timely. In 2004, an Army investigation concluded that prisoners in U.S. custody had been subjected to “numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses” at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Geneva Conventions of 1949, “[Convention \(III\) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War](http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/vwTreaties1949.xsp),” 12 August 1949, *1949 Conventions and Additional Protocols, and their Commentaries*, <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/vwTreaties1949.xsp> (accessed August 18, 2013); Geneva Conventions of 1949, “Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field,” 12 August 1949, *1949 Conventions and Additional Protocols, and their Commentaries*, <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/vwTreaties1949.xsp> (accessed August 18, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba, *Article 15-6 Investigation of the 800<sup>th</sup> Military Police Brigade*, p.16, [http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/operation\\_and\\_plans/Detainee/taguba/TAGUBA\\_REPORT\\_CERTIFICATIONS.pdf](http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/operation_and_plans/Detainee/taguba/TAGUBA_REPORT_CERTIFICATIONS.pdf)

## **“An Army at War is [Not] a Reasonable Thing”**

By Doctorow's account, he began to write *The March* after viewing two photographs, one of Sherman and his generals, the other of a civil war photographer and his wagon.<sup>45</sup> In the novel, Calvin Harper, a free black photographer's assistant, describes the new visual medium and his documentation of the war as “sacred work,” that entails “fixing time in its moments and making memory of the future.” While this concept of photography lends itself to the novels recurring temporal themes, Civil War photographers are known to have re-posed their subjects, especially battlefield dead.<sup>46</sup> This practice of manipulating recorded images hardly lives up to Calvin's earnest belief that “there is no higher calling than to make pictures that show you the true world” (*The March*, 308). In the novel, the documentary integrity of photographs is diminished when Arly Wilcox, a Confederate deserter and conman, forces Harper and his boss to take a portrait of Arly's friend Will. The photograph is intended to serve as proof for Will's family that the dead boy acquitted himself admirably in service of the Confederate army. In truth, readers first meet Will and Arly as prisoners awaiting execution—Will for desertion, Arly for falling asleep on picket duty. Through most of the novel, the adventures of these unlikely companions involve saving themselves from the authority of both armies, an endeavor that compels them to switch sides multiple times. After Confederate guerillas capture Will and Arly wearing uniforms they removed from the Union dead, the two are made to swear an oath of allegiance to the Confederacy, which Will considers absurd. An exasperated Arly in turn directs his comments to God: “I am standing with this boy here who thinks an army at war is a reasonable thing. He thinks a soldier is something more than the uniform he is wearing. He thinks we live in a sane life and time,

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<sup>45</sup> Doctorow and Rose, “A Discussion with Author E.L. Doctorow.”

<sup>46</sup> On arrangement of battlefield dead, see Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 186.



which you know as well as I is not what you designed for us sinners” (*The March*, 64). Arly’s implication is that a warring army is *not* a reasonable thing, that a soldier’s identity is little more than the uniform he wears, and that they do *not* live in a sane life and time. Will actually dies wearing a Federal uniform, requiring that his corpse be re-dressed in the appropriate attire before his picture can be taken. Though postmortem portraits were common in the nineteenth century, Arly’s clear intention is to represent the image as the portrait of a living soldier.<sup>47</sup> Critics have described Arly as a “comic relief” figure who takes a dark turn.<sup>48</sup> During their travels, Arly pontificates a view of humanity that echoes the earlier Civil War writers Michael Shaara and Charles Frazier. According to Arly Wilcox, people are God’s “chief blunder” and contrary to the deity’s high expectations, “we have not turned out right” (*The March*, 159). Will’s death spurs Arly’s delusions of prophecy and his plan to assassinate Sherman and his generals. Arly murders Calvin Harper’s boss, Josiah Culp, assumes the photographer’s identity, and gathers the Union commanders for a group portrait like the one that compelled Doctorow to begin the novel. Calvin Harper’s willingness to accommodate the murderer he dubs a “madman” is the only viable alternative to the dangers he would face as black man traveling through the South alone. Calvin is safe in the affected role of subordinate but knows he might be captured or killed by guerrillas if he reveals himself as the chief photographer (*The March*, 204). The intersection of Arly and Calvin’s narratives contributes to the overarching themes of madness and of identity as something indefinite and performed.

After Arly murders Josiah Culp and assumes his identity, Calvin aptly characterizes Arly Wilcox’s several changes of military affiliation as well as his newest role, posing as Culp:

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<sup>47</sup> Miles Orwell, *American Photography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 25.

<sup>48</sup> Jay Parini, “America’s Most Wretched War,” review of *The March*, by E.L. Doctorow and *The Widow of the South*, by Robert Hicks, *The Guardian* (London) January 28, 2006, LexisNexis Academic; Fritz Lanham, “Rewriting Sherman’s History,” *The Houston (TX) Chronicle*, September 25, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Mayer, “E.L. Doctorow has Written the First Masterpiece of the 21st Century”; Roger Harris, “Doctorow Applies His Winning Formula to Sherman’s March,” *Newhouse News Service*, September 26, 2005, LexisNexis Academic; Balitas, “War Regarded as Human Insanity, in Bloody Detail.”

As they'd followed after the army, Calvin Harper had come to think of his traveling companion as an interesting crazy man. ... What was interesting was how the man wore disguises. He put on something and pretended to be that person. He was like an actor in the theater where the costume you wear is the person you are. He had appeared back in Barnwell as a Union soldier though he was a Southern white-trash Reb. Both of them were, the dead friend, too, who had to be dressed as the Reb he really was before Mr. Culp could take the picture. And then after the picture was developed, and Mr. Josiah Culp was dead, he decided to be him, Mr. Culp, in his own suit and coat and hat" (*The March*, 303).

By the end of the novel, Arly has repeatedly enacted his philosophy that a soldier's role is a performance based on the uniform he wears and that he does not live in a sane life and time. Arly's ruminations on identity become strangely literalized in the battle of Bentonville, when some of the advancing Confederate soldiers wear "Union blue to create chaos" and gain an advantage over the Federals. "For fatal moments" the Union troops hesitate as they wonder, "Should they be firing on their own men?" when in fact the "bluecoats" rushing at them are Rebels wearing the wrong uniforms (*The March*, 300, 301). When "one of the attackers in blue" hurls himself on Lt. Oakey, and raises himself to inflict "one final skull-crushing blow," Oakey, the real union officer who appears nowhere else in the novel, fatally shoots the imposter, who acts with "the fury of a nonhuman intention" (*The March*, 301).

### **"From Under the Yoke of Bondage": Freedom, Parades, and the Shelter of the "New Roof"**

Even as the moral transgressions of *The March* resonate with America's 21<sup>st</sup> century wars, the novel also anticipates the nation's trajectory in the years following the Civil War. In what one reviewer described as a "canny feat of postmodern legerdemain," Doctorow's Sherman hums "The Ride of the Valkyries." According to the reviewer, the tune evokes both the helicopter attack scene from *Apocalypse Now* and a moral ambivalence associated with the Vietnam War.<sup>49</sup> Long before

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<sup>49</sup> Boyagoda, "When the World is Fire and Death."

*Apocalypse*, however, “The Ride of the Valkyries” was included in D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* and in Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, which concludes with the destruction of the gods at Valhalla. In *Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell evokes the Götterdämmerung to characterize Confederate defeat and the social reorganization that occurred during Reconstruction. In *The Wind Done Gone*, this mythical apocalypse describes the overthrow of Reconstruction by white supremacists. With several allusions to popular culture, Sherman’s intonation suggests war as a state of ethical bewilderment and evokes the defeat of Reconstruction. Though it lies beyond the novel’s temporal frame, the failure of Reconstruction looms over the novel, along with the imminent betrayal of the hopes of the newly free.

As a portent of the freedmen’s postwar experience, Doctorow recounts the incident at Ebenezer Creek in which Federal soldiers withdraw their pontoon bridges, leaving thousands of freedmen refugees stranded with Confederates in close pursuit. Doctorow emphasizes the chaos and desperation of the scene, with refugees, “screaming, praying, importuning God.” Some “black pioneer soldiers” throw brush in the water for use as floatation devices. They assist in pulling across a raft that some of the men have managed to lash together. Many of the freedpeople, fearing the Confederate approach, do not wait their turn and plunge into the water. Others remain on the bank unable to act. Several of the refugees drown; some, according to Secretary Stanton, are murdered by Confederate guerillas (*The March*, 118).

As the army withdraws what little security it affords to the freedmen refugees, Doctorow narrates the experience from the perspective of Wilma Jones. When the makeshift raft capsizes with her aboard, Wilma is pulled from the water by one of the pioneers. After their initial meeting, which Wilma attributes to the “grace of God,” Coalhouse Walker shares his rations and sees to her safety as he goes about his work for the army. The chapter at Ebenezer Creek closes with Wilma and Coalhouse walking away from the creek while the cries of people left on the north bank echo down the road. Wilma and Coalhouse’s story resumes just after a Union victory parade in Savannah, where Wilma recognizes the

daughter of her former owner riding in a carriage with Pearl, whom Wilma identifies as “another white girl” (*The March*, 92). The sight of Emily Thompson agitates Wilma. Coalhouse reminds her, “you free, you disremember that?” at which point Wilma bursts into tears. The procession also stirs distressing thoughts for Pearl, who, along with Emily Thompson, now works as a volunteer nurse in Sartorius’s medical service. Watching the soldiers file past, she realizes that if not for the Union flags and the shouts of the sergeants to suggest otherwise, “she would think it was so sad, these men with their rifles on their shoulders making a show of their victor but looking to her eyes like they [are] indentured as she once was, though maybe not born into it” (*The March*, 92). Pearl suggests the military hierarchy as a form of unfreedom just as she and Wilma recall their former bondage, practically at the same time.

Their spectatorship at the same military review is especially noteworthy given the significance Doctorow attaches to parades in *The March*, as in his other texts. Parades abound in *The March*, and a series of them punctuates Wilma’s experience, in particular. On the day she and Emily Thompson both join the march, three parades pass through Milledgeville. First come the Federal soldiers, with the drummer Pearl somewhere among them. Pearl’s stint as a drummer boy places her in the all-important position of beating out the rhythm to which Sherman’s soldiers march, but her participation coincides with a performance of identity that figures her as white and male. Later in the day, Emily Thompson watches as a group of her Milledgeville neighbors take to the streets to cheer a band of guerilla cavalry who have taken three Union prisoners, including a drummer boy. “And so,” writes Doctorow, “here was another parade, a scraggly one, a few citizens following a ragtag bunch on horse, looking proud and victorious in their intention to execute two men and a boy” (*The March*, 34). Subsequent revelations suggest the drummer boy may be Pearl’s predecessor in Clarke’s company and the two prisoners are actually Will and Arly dressed in Federal uniforms; but Emily Thompson, whose brother died in the Confederate army, is so “appalled” at this “secessionist answer,” she packs a bag and sets

out to join Sherman's army. Between the two military processions is a "parade of black folks who had chosen to follow the [Union] army" (*The March*, 33). Composed of men, women, and children walking, sometimes limping or riding in wagons, this parade is unlike the army it follows. The people emit a "rhythmless festive sound," a "celebratory chatter," laughter and singing. Of the novel's many parades, this one most resembles the spirit of the Constitutional celebrations that Doctorow elsewhere identifies as the symbolic enactment of national identity. In freeing themselves and joining this itinerant civilization, the participants, formerly excluded by their bondage, now exercise a sense of national belonging. As she departs the house of her former master, Wilma Jones falls into this parade, the same one that is broken up just as symbolically by the actions of the army at Ebenezer Creek.

For that incident, the resulting casualties, and Sherman's refusal to enlist black men as anything other than laborers, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton reprimands the general. True to the historical record, Doctorow includes a summit between Sherman, Stanton, and a group of freedman elders who explain how former slaves understand slavery and freedom. The elders' definition of freedom centers on self-sufficiency achieved through their own labor. "Slavery," they say, "is receiving by irresistible power the work of another man and not by his consent." Freedom, as assured by the Emancipation Proclamation, is "taking us from under the yoke of bondage and placing us where we can reap the fruits of our own labor and take care of ourselves and assist the government in maintaining our freedom" (*The March*, 119).<sup>50</sup> After the meeting, Sherman issues Special Field Order No.15, making abandoned Confederate property available for settlement by freedpeople, along with the seed and equipment to farm the property (*The March*, 120). Sherman, who is a Unionist but not an abolitionist, issues the order mainly to placate Stanton and relieve the army of the civilian refugees. For former slaves, however, the order represents an opportunity to realize the vision of freedom articulated by the

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<sup>50</sup> The definitions of slavery and freedom were articulated by the group's spokesman, a Baptist minister named Garrison Frazier; see Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 2.

freedmen elders. When Wilma Jones and Coalhouse Walker discuss their future, they debate whether to make their living in the city or acquire the forty acres promised each freedmen head of household under Sherman's order. Echoing the freedmen elders, Coalhouse argues that "a man who owns his own land is a free man" (*The March*, 127). He eventually persuades Wilma, who acknowledges that their former enslavers derived their power from land ownership. She comes to agree with Coalhouse that in "staking a claim, you stake out your freedom" (*The March*, 128). Wilma and Coalhouse's last appearance in the novel finds them crossing paths, one last time with a parade of marching troops. As the literate Wilma completes the land application, she asks Coalhouse how he wants his name to appear on the document. He answers, "Coalhouse Walker, Sr.," and declares, "Just come along to the preacher, if you please, and I promise you before you know it there will be a Coalhouse Walker, Jr." (*The March*, 128). Since land parcels are proffered only to heads of household, the proposed wedding is necessary to qualify for the land ownership the couple regard as their claim to freedom. In the realm of Civil War memory, matrimony serves a variety of symbolic functions, even metaphorical bondage, but for Coalhouse Walker and Wilma Jones, marriage is the path to freedom defined in terms of land ownership and self-sufficiency.

As Wilma and Coalhouse drop out of the narrative, Doctorow does not reveal that the abandoned lands on which they stake their hopes will eventually revert to the original owners. The promise of Sherman's order will go unfulfilled, and the return of confiscated lands to former slaveholders will instate a modified form of labor exploitation, the sharecropping system. Wilma's misgivings, which she attributes to the residual psychology of her former enslavement, portends the reversal of Sherman's order and the invalidation of what Coalhouse describes as "Mr. Lincoln presenting me with what I am owed" for a life of enslavement (*The March*, 127).

The chapter's concluding reference to the protagonist of *Ragtime* encourages an intertextual reading, figuring the story of Coalhouse, Jr. as a continuation of Wilma and Coalhouse, Sr.'s

experience. In *Ragtime*, after a group of Long Island firefighters harass Walker and vandalize his model T, the legal authorities refuse to act upon the charges of a black plaintiff, particularly against the white offenders. Walker's pursuit of justice compels his fiancé to appeal directly to Vice President James Sherman, who is in town for a campaign event. When Sarah attempts to approach the vice president, his guards mistake her for a would-be assassin. One strikes her so hard with a rifle butt that he breaks her sternum and several ribs. Sarah develops pneumonia and dies within a week. Walker then seeks justice by extralegal means, beginning with the bombing of a firehouse and culminating in his occupation of J.P. Morgan's library. The threat of exploding the building and its priceless collections finally effects the restoration of Walker's automobile, but as he attempts to surrender to police, Walker is fatally shot.<sup>51</sup> The imminent reversal of his parents' land allotment, Sara's death and the execution-without-trial of Coalhouse, Jr. are the results of a legal system working primarily to defend the property rights of white citizens, including—until the Civil War—their right of property ownership in other human beings. As Doctorow fictionalizes the ongoing struggle to extend the shelter of "The New Roof," the two central families of *The March*, the Wilkins-Jamesons and the Jones-Walkers, evoke a multigenerational history of exclusion in both familial and national terms.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (1974; repr., New York: Plume, 1996).

<sup>52</sup> Similarly, literary scholar Scott Hales reads *The March*, particularly Sherman's end-of-war longing for life on the road and its incongruity with the actual experience, as a critique of narratives that romanticize the Civil War past. Hales specifically cites the reconciliationist themes that conclude Ken Burns's documentary, *The Civil War*, and argues that unlike Burns who views history as a "healing tonic," Doctorow shows "America at its worst" and reminds his readers that "the mistakes of the past should not be forgotten." While perhaps oversimplifying the positions of both novelist and filmmaker, Hales suggests a crucial point of comparison for Doctorow's novel. Indeed, with its combination of post-mortem photographs and first-person narration, *The Civil War* is often the more explicit of the two narratives in depicting the conflict's physical human carnage. But where Burns's need to tell a redemptive story leads him to celebrate national reunion and downplay the country's postwar betrayal of African Americans, *The March* does not succumb to the same impetus to provide a redemptive conclusion. As Hales observes, Doctorow minimizes the reunion elements of *The March*. And while it constitutes more than simply "America at its worst," Doctorow's narrative tends toward moral ambiguity, which is not resolved at the end of *The March*; Scott Hales, "Marching through Memory: Revising Memory in E. L. Doctorow's *The March*," *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 21, no. 1 (2009):146-161.

## **“So I Could Tell You I am Free”: The Identity of Pearl Wilkins Jameson**

Like Wilma and Coalhouse, Pearl finds freedom difficult to negotiate, though much of her conflict involves her sense of identity. Named by her mother for the whiteness of her skin, Pearl can and sometimes does pass for white, but she also expresses a deep concern about how her racial identity figures into her new freedom, especially if she allows others to think of her as white. Like the Confederate Arly Wilcox and his companion Will, Pearl frequently changes garments, though in her case, a change of uniform signals a change of gender identity. After being taken up by Lt. Clarke as his troops depart Fieldstone, one of the sergeants produces a drummer-boy uniform for Pearl, which allows her to travel with the soldiers and remain under Clarke's protection. When she walks into Sandersonville in search of Clarke and his men, Pearl removes the uniform and wears only her own clothing. "When she entered the village," Doctorow writes, "it was as a white Negro girl" (*The March*, 50). After watching the townspeople bury Clarke and his men, Pearl locates her hidden uniform and again dons the attire of a Union drummer boy until she becomes a volunteer nurse. After first trying on the drummer uniform, Pearl tells Clarke, "Sompun wrong bein a white drum boy" (*The March*, 43). Pearl begins to feel that she should stay with the other former slaves from the Jameson plantation, though they were never kind to her. She also has second thoughts about leaving Fieldstone. Pearl is especially concerned that in her absence, her mother's grave will be forgotten. Though the plantation of her childhood afforded little companionship, except for the kindness of Roscoe, the familiarity of the place remains attractive to Pearl. In defiance of the freedmen Jacob Early and Jubal Samuels, who come looking for her, Pearl decides to remain with Clarke's company. As though blaming Pearl's mother for her own exploitation, Early tells Pearl she had better go with them, "lest you be some Jez'bel fer de army like you mam been to Mass' Jameson" (*The March*, 45). Pearl rebukes Early for insulting the memory of her mother, a "poor slave," like him, and for ostracizing her at Fieldstone.



Though she screams at Early, “I ain’t no Jez’bel,” the accusation troubles her (*The March*, 45). She later worries that she is not free at all, particularly as her attachments to white men—Lt. Clarke, Sherman’s aides, and finally Stephen Walsh—incite fears of replicating her mother’s exploitation by her father. At one point, her anxiety compels Pearl to flee the sleeping quarters she shares with Walsh and stroll through the freedmen’s camp in the middle of the night. In her wandering, she discovers the child David in a state of hysteria after he has been abandoned by Pryce. She comforts David and takes him into her care.

Pearl is also discomfited by the degree to which she finds herself in the service of her stepmother and former mistress. The two meet again in the army hospital after a blow from a rifle butt crushes the side of John Jameson’s skull. As Pearl enters the ward where she assists with nursing duties, she discovers a woman sitting bedside, who looks to be her father’s spouse. She then recognizes the unconscious patient as the man who failed to acknowledge her as his child but whom Pearl knows to be her “Pap” (*The March*, 111). Mattie believes “this child of her husband’s sin” has come to “announce such upheavals of fortune as only God in his vengeance could design.” “How many times during the years,” Mattie asks herself, “did she want to touch this beautiful child, how many times she had wanted to make her life easier?” (*The March*, 112). But John Jameson had “wanted nothing to do with her” and so Mattie had found it “easy enough” to do nothing. The death of Pearl’s mother Nancy Wilkins had been a relief to Mattie, who thought she would be free of the humiliation of her husband’s infidelity, but the child Pearl remained. For her own failure to show her husband’s daughter any kindness, Mattie transfers blame from Jameson to Pearl. According to Mattie, Pearl was “accepted neither in the house nor in the quarters, too sassy for one and disdainful of the other” (*The March*, 112). Finally, as she recalls their departure from Fieldstone, Mattie comes to see herself as something other than the “good Christian woman” she has always thought herself to be. She remembers Pearl standing before their carriage, waiting for some acknowledgment from her father, waiting, Mattie thinks, for

John to tell her to join the family. Mattie had been glad that Jameson continued to ignore his daughter, of whom Mattie had thought “good riddance” (*The March*, 113).

For Pearl, the hospital scene is not initially about the woman she calls “the wife ma’am” but about the master and father who never acknowledged her as his child, the man who now lies unconscious on his deathbed. The words Pearl speaks to him are her self-emancipation. “I wish you was to wake up,” she tells him, “so I could tell you I am free” (*The March*, 113). Certain that he is still listening, Pearl admonishes her father. Asserting the kinship that John Jameson had so long denied, she tells him, “This Pearl, your own born chile here.” With a second assertion of her identity, she adopts the surnames of both parents, and in language that renders her former master powerless, Pearl Wilkins Jameson tells her father that she carries his name by Biblical law; he can do nothing about it. If he is worried at all about his child, Pearl assures Jameson that no man will ever treat her the way he treated her mother. Such parental concern would be out of character for Jameson, but Pearl’s assurance serves an indictment of his dual wrongs against Nancy Wilkins and their daughter. Finally, Pearl’s words return to the fact that she has claimed the surname of the man who denies her: “She goin’ far, your Pearl. She will take your name to glory. Scrub it up of the shame and shit you put upon it. Make it nice and clean again for peoples to remember” (*The March*, 113).

After Jameson’s death, Pearl’s report that Fieldstone has burned to the ground leads to Mattie’s psychological withdrawal and Pearl’s uneasy guardianship of a stepmother who exhibits symptoms of a psychological illness. As Pearl recalls the plantation of her birth, she chides herself, “Thinkin that is not bein wholly free,” but then acknowledges the implications of looking after Mattie: “Not that I be free tendin to this wife ma’m who never paid me no mind, like I am her slave still” (*The March*, 145). As Mattie tags along with the Federal army, Pearl insists that she make herself useful by helping to care for the wounded. In exchange for looking after Mattie, Pearl directs her to do what never occurred to Mattie in all their years at Fieldstone: Teach Pearl to read.

## **“What Did I Say I Can’t Remember?”: Memory, Identity, and the National Trauma of Slavery**

If the stories of *The March* share a common thread, it is the trope of madness. The affliction of multiple characters, it is also the dominant metaphor for slavery, war, and American identity. In addition to the mania of Arly Wilcox, General Sherman, experiences “bouts of irresolution and hysteria” after Bull Run; his adjutant Teack recalls finding him “curled upon the ground in his tent, his knuckles in his teeth and terrible whimpering sounds coming from him” (*The March*, 78). Even before his fatal skull fracture, John Jameson’s behavior, Doctorow suggests, is the product of an “unstable mind” (*The March*, 109). When the Federal army seizes the cotton warehouse where he stored his valuables, Jameson demands the return of the confiscated property. Belligerent and “beyond reason,” Jameson attempts to strike the Union guards with a paving stone. To avert the assault, one of the soldiers bashes Jameson’s head with the butt of a rifle. For Mattie, the loss of spouse, property, and station effects a mental decline that Dr. Sartorius diagnoses a form of “dementia” (*The March*, 192). Her condition recalls the parental delirium of *Gone With the Wind*, but unlike Gerald O’Hara, Mattie Jameson comes to depend on the stepdaughter and former slave she previously mistreated by her indifference. The degree to which her mental state affects her reasoning remains unclear, but Mattie asks to be taken on the march in the seemingly irrational belief that she can save her children from being killed in the army. While the elder John Jameson is turned away for being too old to keep up in the ranks, the Confederates are only too willing to enlist the Jamesons’ fourteen- and fifteen-year-old sons. With her husband dead, Mattie convinces herself that she can find the boys among thousands of troops and snatch them to safety. Pearl tells Mattie she is “a crazy woman to think so,” but she knows mothers think that way, and “a mother’s craziness,” is not the worst kind (*The March*, 146).

True to historical record, as Union troops empty the city’s store of shells and gunpowder into the Saluda River, an accidental explosion sets the city ablaze. When the state asylum catches fire, some

of its patients are transferred to the army's makeshift hospital at South Carolina College. Frightened and disoriented, the asylum residents roam the unfamiliar halls, moaning and screaming. Troops charged with restoring order usher the psychiatric patients to the basement, but their cries still rise to the upper floors. The remaining patients—soldiers injured in the blast and civilians mostly suffering from shock—look for “some assurance” from the medical staff that “there were still civilized controls in the world, that all was not fire and madness and death” (*The March*, 191). Until the Columbia fire, Mattie Jameson's grief “[devolves] into a blessed state of dreaminess.” On the night of the fire, however, the commotion around her draws Mattie out of her stupor. The chaos becomes “something she could tend.” Just as Will and Arly's performativity reflects a loss of rationality in a society at war, the pandemonium of the Columbia fire conforms to Mattie Jameson's condition. The sight of Mattie crouching among the patients, consoling them astonishes Emily Thompson, who concludes that “Mattie Jameson's mental state befitted the situation in which she found herself. The world at war had risen to her affliction and made it indistinguishable” (*The March*, 192).

Among the casualties of the Columbia disaster is Albion Simms, whose proximity to the initial blast leaves a metal wagon spike lodged in his skull. The case presents something of a curiosity to the medical staff, who are more accustomed to communicable diseases and amputations. Most favor surgical extraction, but Sartorius overrules them. Scar tissue or inflammation might complicate the injury, he concludes, but “surgery would without question enhance the trauma” (*The March*, 269). Though he believes the corporal will continue to deteriorate and ultimately die from his wound, Sartorius declares Simms's survival a “miracle” and initiates a scientific observation of the man who, with an iron spike protruding from his temple, retains all physiological function but no memory.

Albion Simms, who becomes a case not to treat but to study, is the namesake of two prominent nineteenth century literary figures. William Gilmore Simms was an ardent defender of slavery and an

enthusiastic supporter of succession.<sup>53</sup> Simms's novels belonged to a plantation fiction that romanticized happy slaves and benevolent masters. In his 1879 novel *A Fool's Errand*, Albion Tourgée blamed the federal government for the failures of Reconstruction and judged it especially derelict in defending the rights of African Americans against white supremacist intimidation and violence. In his study of Civil War literature, Daniel Aaron summarizes Tourgée's view of the war, in part, as "The North finally won the War, the real purpose of which [slavery] it had been ashamed to acknowledge, and proceeded to apologize thereafter to the vanquished. It taught its children to forget, not to forgive, and its self-abasement effaced 'all possible records of the strife.'"<sup>54</sup> Doctorow's Albion Simms and the manner of his injury, thus, emblemize both the national effects slavery—that volatile "powder fuse" that caused the country to blow itself apart—and conflicting impulses for remembrance.<sup>55</sup>

Albion Simms exhibits a healthy appetite, sound reflexes, as well as normal vision and hearing, but he does not recognize his own name. He recalls nothing in his past beyond the moment of his injury and the sensation of being stung. Eventually, even this recollection eludes him, but one day, unaccountably, Albion Simms recalls the lyrics to a song that he sings to Sartorius. Thereafter, the doctor uses the song as a gauge of Simms's deterioration. Doctorow writes, "Within a week, Albion couldn't remember the words or understand that he had once sung them, and asked what the Fourth of July meant he didn't respond. Then one day he sang the song again, and the next day it was gone from his mind" (*The March*, 271). Failure to recall the meaning of the holiday that the song evokes in its final line suggests both the degree of Albion's forgetfulness and a conflict of interpretation. The man's survival is not so much a miracle as a study in contradiction. With no recoverable past, Albion Simms's very existence as a character and a national emblem, down to his very name, renders him a living,

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (1973; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 17.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>55</sup> Doctorow, "A Citizen Reads the Constitution," 214.

breathing, wholly insensible paradox. When he fails to answer the doctor's question, this walking enigma may recall nothing of national independence or the anniversary of American freedom, but his lack of response also suggests a failure—his and the nation's—to reconcile the founding principal of universal equality with the imposition of lifelong bondage.

The song Albion Simms sometimes sings is this: "Oh the coo coo/Is a pretty bird/And she wobbles as she flies/ But she never sings her coo coo/ 'Til the fourth day of July" (*The March*, 271). Invoking Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.'s observation, "We American's are cuckoos. We build our homes in the nests of other birds," Greil Marcus parses the meaning of the folk song:

As long as seven hundred years ago, the English were singing that the cuckoo heralded the coming of summer, and yet the bird was hated. Its cry was reviled through the centuries as oppressive, repetitious, maniacally boring, a cry to drive you crazy, a cry that was already crazy, befitting a bird that was insane. The cuckoo—the true "parasitic" cuckoo, which despite Holmes's choice of it for national bird is not found in the United States—lays its eggs in the nests of other birds. It is a kind of scavenger in reverse: violating the natural order of things, it is by its own nature an outsider, a creature that cannot belong. Depositing its orphans, leaving its progeny to be raised by others, to grow up as imposters in another's house—as America filled itself up with slaves, indentured servants, convicts, hustlers, adventurers, the ambitious and the greedy, the fleeing and the hated, who took or were given new, imposters' names—the cuckoo becomes the other and sees all other creatures as other.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, if a host bird rejects an egg, the adult cuckoo may retaliate by destroying the remaining inhabitants of the nest, just as a cuckoo hatchling ousts the other chicks. Marcus likens this behavior to the United States and its dislocation of Native Americans from their ancestral homelands.<sup>57</sup> As the bird of Simms's folk tune reserves its own disreputable call for the Fourth of July, the lyric further equates the "specter of alienation," the cuckoo, with the hollow squawk of liberty selectively applied.

When Albion no longer recalls even his own name, Dr. Sartorius reminds his patient that he knew this information the day before. Albion's reply, "Is this yesterday?" and his assertion that he has

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<sup>56</sup> Greil Marcus and Bob Dylan, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1997), 118-119.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

“forgotten yesterday” suggests that the patient cannot recall the previous day’s events but more importantly that the basic temporal concept of “yesterday” is now beyond his grasp. Albion’s forgetting is nearly instantaneous, as he confides in the doctor, “I can’t remember. I say a word and I can’t remember it. What did I say I can’t remember?” (*The March*, 274). Though he first complains of pain in his head, his immediate failure to retain the thought leads Albion to identify an alternate cause of his suffering: “It’s always now. That’s what hurts...” (*The March*, 274). Five times Albion asserts his existence as a state of perpetual present. Once, Sartorius repeats the words back to the patient when he asks “What did I just say?” He is unable to recall the utterance of only a few seconds earlier because indeed, for Albion Simms, who rocks back and forth as he repeats the observation, “It’s always now...It’s always now” (*The March*, 274).

Albion reprises this mantra and the song of the cuckoo while in the company of David. The child who boldly asserts his freedom by fleeing the household of his ex-master takes an interest in Albion, who has been secured in a wooden box designed to prevent the patient’s travel from further aggravating his head injury. In what begins as a nonsensical conversation like the doctor’s interview, Albion persuades David to untie his hands, which have been bound for the wounded soldier’s own safety. In one instant declaring, “I don’t like my hands tied. I am in misery,” the next asking “What did I say I am?” Albion finally prevails upon David to release him from his restraints. Repeating the first line of his song and promising to show David a trick, Albion discovers the metal spike he forgot having lodged in his skull. He first taps the spike with his finger, which, as a trick, David judges unimpressive. Then, for his climactic feat, Albion uses his free hand to ram the spike into his brain (*The March*, 313).

In the penultimate chapter of *Cold Mountain*, Inman recounts the advice of the Goat Woman who told him “God lays the unbearable on you and then takes some back”; but Ada contends, “You have to give him some help in forgetting. You have to work at not trying to call such thoughts up, for if you call hard enough they’ll come” (*Cold Mountain*, 343). Ada’s sentiments coincide with the overall

tone of that novel's final chapter, which prescribes an orientation toward the future, rather than endless, repetitive grief. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Cynara describes a conflict between her fear of remembering a painful past and losing her cognitive memory as a symptom of lupus. While Geraldine Brooks's *March* is less concerned with individual cognitive memory, her novel depicts a process of cultural memory that suppresses the most horrific aspects of slavery and war. In *The March*, Albion Simms's injury and demise deliver a dire warning against too much forgetfulness. The plantation fiction evoked by the character's surname perpetuated the lie that human bondage was a positive good. The acceptance of that narrative in popular culture is part of what W.E.B DuBois referred to as "the propaganda of history." At the same time, the name Albion evokes the defeat of Reconstruction and the nation's failure to deliver on the promise of equal citizenship, a story recounted in *A Fool's Errand*. Unable to recall his personal history and often his highly-symbolic name, Albion's memory loss is so severe, it encompasses his origins and identity. His symptoms evoke a phenomenon of national forgetting that first enabled white sectional reconciliation, then a nation-wide celebration of Confederate victimhood. And yet Albion's affliction, which results from a physical trauma but manifests as Alzheimer's-like dementia, encompasses a much earlier period suggested by the cuckoo folk song. The reality of a slaveholding nation that is founded on expropriated land and that belies, or rather forgets, its own founding principles is aptly represented by Albion's story. While Albion Simms's injury certainly represents the Civil War and its aftermath, Doctorow also suggests the presence of slavery in a liberty loving republic as the metaphorical equivalent of having a metal spike lodged in the skull. The nation, unaccountably, survives the initial injury and continues to function physically for a time but without recollecting its origins or identity. While extracting the spike might exacerbate the injury, leaving it in place will likely effect a slow decline and eventually death. Albion's perpetual present embodied in the mantra "It's always now" exactly reproduces the temporality of human bondage, which deprives enslaved people of a discernible past and affords no expectation of a



future beyond the chattel condition. While the discomfort of Albion's physical restraints further associates him with forms of unfreedom, his self-inflicted deathblow signals the ultimate danger of forgetting. Seated next to the novel's youngest claimant of freedom, Albion Simms rediscovers his metal protuberance but fails to comprehend its lethal potential and hastens his own demise. The peculiar case of Albion Simms offers the song of the loony, predatory cuckoo as the anthem of American identity and associates slavery with a potentially deadly national dementia. Literary scholar Scott Hales also reads Simms as a symbol of "twenty-first century America and the historical amnesia it exhibited in the wake [of] its own massive head-wound, the terrorist attacks of 9/11."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, when Doctorow writes of the United States in the seven years after the fatal hijackings, he writes of a nation in "spiritual disarray" and of a people who have lost "our once-clear national sense of ourselves."<sup>59</sup>

### **"Nothing You will Ever Do...Will Be Enough to Pay Us Back"**

The story of Pearl looking after the stepmother who has shown her such little concern ultimately turns toward a resolution when Mattie realizes her worst fear of finding a son among the war's casualties. Drawn to the scene by Mattie's howls, Pearl finds her stepmother kneeling before a corpse Mattie knows to be her son. Though the boy's face has been shot away, a birthmark like a copper coin just below his collarbone confirms the identity of the eldest son, John Junior.

Pearl knows the Jameson sons, her half-brothers, as "rotten boys" who were cruel to slaves. The Brothers One and Two, as Pearl calls them, spied on women as they bathed and blamed bondspeople for stealing food the boys had taken. Once, after a field hand suffered a severe whipping, they rubbed salt in the man's wounds and took pleasure in the torture. While the boys indicate no knowledge of a

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<sup>58</sup> Hales, "Marching Through Memory," 159.

<sup>59</sup> Doctorow, "The White Whale," 29.

biological relation to Pearl, it is unclear whether they truly are unaware of their common paternity or simply imitate their father's example of denial. The brothers' conversation reveals sexual intentions toward Pearl, who for her part "kept the brothers at bay without much trouble," but she had worried what would happen if John Jameson died and the sons became her legal owners. Roscoe reassured her that in such a case, he would "kill them before they raised a hand, and he would die a happy man knowing surely he was bound for Heaven" (*The March*, 282).

After the discovery of John Junior, Pearl locates the surviving son, Jamie, among the Confederate prisoners of war and smuggles him back to his mother for a reunion she does not care to witness. Pearl instructs Jamie how to slip away from the army, return to Georgia, and request assistance from Emily Thompson, who by this time has left Sartorius and the Union army. Most significantly, Pearl gives Jamie one of Roscoe's twenty dollar gold pieces, along with the admonishment that he will have the rest of his life to remember that it was Pearl who secured his freedom. Telling Jamie that the coin was Roscoe's and represented his lifetime of enslaved labor, Pearl invokes a lifelong debt and suggests the impossibility of ever making adequate reparations for slavery. "Nothing you will ever do in your life," she tells Jamie, "will be enough to pay us back" (*The March*, 291). The use of Roscoe's second coin to buy a replacement mule for Calvin's wagon evokes the phrase "forty acres and a mule," which popularized Sherman's promise of land and equipment in Field Order No. 15. If, as the senior Coalhouse Walker argues, those allotments constituted what was owed to ex-slaves for a lifetime of bondage, then the reversal of the freedmen's land deeds compounded the debt of enslavement.

In the pages leading up to the novel's final march, Doctorow foreshadows the cultural narratives about the Civil War and slavery that would develop in the decades following the war. When soldiers awaiting treaty negotiations begin to fraternize, Doctorow writes, "It was possible also for blue and gray to talk about the battles they had fought as something they had done together, something shared" (*The March*, 353). Reflecting on the end of the war, the fictional Sherman finds himself "of two

minds.” Though he proclaims a certainty that his cause was just, he considers “victory...a shadowed, ambiguous thing.” “I will go on wondering about my actions,” thinks Sherman. “Whereas General Johnston and his colleagues of the unjust cause, now embittered and awash in defeat, will have sublimed to a righteously aggrieved state that would empower them for a century” (*The March*, 349).

Just as the novel unfolds with the army’s advance, it concludes with a forward momentum of characters who take to the road in pursuit of the possibilities they have planned for themselves. Calvin intends to sell the photographs he and Josiah Culp made to document the war. He supposes he can also support himself making portraits of soldiers returning from the conflict. David will live with Calvin and his sister. Pearl plans to attend medical school and marry Stephen Walsh, who wants to become a lawyer. This small retinue can be seen as embodying something like Doctorow’s definition of the American Dream in their own miniature march, but their route takes them through a recent battle site still thick with smoke and carnage. It is an ominous portent for the future. Pearl and Stephen Walsh’s plans require Pearl to deny her African American heritage, raising the question, “If I live white, how free am I?” (*The March*, 362). Though Doctorow does not say so, the market for Civil War photographs would eventually disappear as interest in the conflict faded.<sup>60</sup> With respect to the Civil War and slavery, America, like Albion Simms, would engage in its own peculiar, self-destructive forgetting for a century to come.

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<sup>60</sup> E.F. Bleiler, introduction to *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War* (1866; repr., New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959), n.p.